JAN. 1945

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

15¢

20¢ in Canada

OWLHOOT TRIGGERS FOR THE LAW

NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL By T. W. FORD

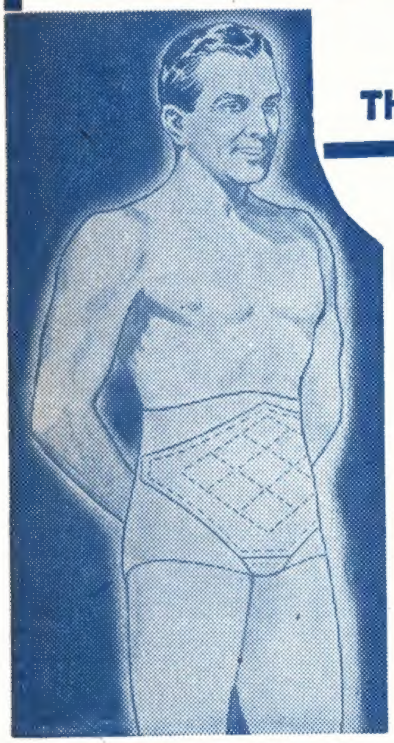
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

THOUSANDS of MEN NOW

Appear SLIMMER — *Feel* BETTER — *Look* YOUNGER

with Commander

The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



MAKE THIS TEST ➡ WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE
The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET
The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER
The COMMANDER braces your figure . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!
The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!

*THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A porous non-stretch material is built into the Special stretch body of the COMMANDER . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most. **NO BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.**

Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."
Dr. A. M. S.
Standish, Mich.

"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."
P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

SEND FOR IT TODAY—USE THIS COUPON

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342 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK 17, N. Y.
Send me the "COMMANDER" for ten days Free Trial. I will pay postman the special price of $2.98 plus postage. If not satisfied after wearing it ten days I may return it and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

My waist measure.....My height is.....
(Send string the size of waist if measuring tape is not available.)

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☐ Check here if you enclose $2.98 with this order and we will pay postage charges. The same refund offer holds.

10 DAY FREE TRIAL SEND NO MONEY

Wear COMMANDER ten days FREE. If it fails to do all we say, send it back and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

ONLY $2.98

SIZES 28 to 47
SPECIAL LARGE SIZES 48 to 60, $3.98

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CASH WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST!

AMAZING NEW

GOLD SEAL POLICY

$1 COSTS LESS THAN *a month*

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All Around PROTECTION!...

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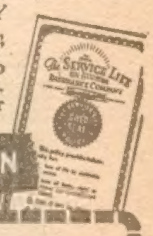
No red tape! Fast Service! Policy issued *BY MAIL* at *big savings* to men and women, ages 15 to 69. Actual policy sent for 10 Days' FREE Examination. Write for it today. No cost. No obligation. No salesman will call. Use coupon below. Do it today! Provide for tomorrow!



DON'T TAKE CHANCES! Act Today! Tomorrow May Be Too Late!

Here is a policy that pays, as specified, for *ANY and ALL accidents, ALL the* common sicknesses, even for minor injuries; and pays disability benefits from the very first day. *NO waiting period.* NO, this is not the usual "limited" policy. There are NO trick clauses! NO jokers! NO red tape! You don't have to pay to see this policy. Just send us your *name, age* and *name of beneficiary* and we'll send you the policy for 10 DAYS' FREE INSPECTION. No cost. No obligation. No salesman will call.

The SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE CO.
493-G SERVICE LIFE BUILDING **Omaha 2, Nebraska**

FREE 10-DAY INSPECTION COUPON

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493-G Service Life Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebraska

SEND without cost or obligation your extra-liberal "Gold Seal" $1-A-MONTH Policy for 10 Days' Free Inspection.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....AGE.....

CITY.....STATE.....

BENEFICIARY.....

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 11 ★ JANUARY, 1945 ★ Number 4

ACTION-PACKED NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

OWLHOOT TRIGGERS FOR THE LAW ..... By T. W. Ford 10

The vengeance-trail against Miles Vergez, lawman, lead Dal Casson into the orbit of the notorious Kid Mintol, who held Vergez' daughter captive. And Casson swore he'd rescue Beth Vergez—for a price. Then Mintol tangled with the equally deadly Jubal Ace, and Casson found his schemes knocked haywire. But worst of all was the sudden realization that he loved Beth Vergez!

SHORT STORIES

CONVICT'S CINCH ..... By Archie Joscelyn 73

Wayne Phillips' failure to repair that near-gone cinch was what saved his life!

BRONC-BUSTING GOBBLER ..... By Joe Austell Small 81

Who'd have thought that this tom turkey would be the cure for a booger-shy horse?

NO QUARTER FOR A KILLER ..... By Cliff Campbell 92

Even when he's clever enough to make cold-blooded murder look like suicide!

BUSHWHACKER'S PARADISE ..... By Lee Floren 97

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe had a different job on their hands this time. For they had to avenge the death of a friend who might not be dead after all!

DEPARTMENT

TRAIL AND SADDLE ..... Articles of the West 85

"Glamour of the Old West Lives," by Kenneth P. Wood.

Cover by H. W. Scott *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

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Here's your opportunity to get a good job in a busy field with a bright peacetime future! Today there is a shortage of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs, tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time—how you get **practical** experience building and testing Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

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Keeping old Radios working is booming the Radio Repair business. Profits are large, after-the-war prospects are bright, too. Think of the new boom in Radio Sales and Servicing that's coming when new Radios are again available—when Frequency Modulation and Electronics can be promoted—when Television starts its postwar expansion! Broadcasting Stations, Aviation Radio, Police Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Radio Manufacturing all offer good jobs now to qualified Radio men—and most of these fields have a **big backlog** of business that is building up during the war, **plus** opportunities to expand into **new** fields opened by wartime developments. You may never again see a time when it will be so easy to get a start in Radio!

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The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that help show how to make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while still learning. I send you SIX big kits of Radio parts as part of my Course. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my illustrated, easy-to-grasp lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building real Radio Circuits—and USE your knowledge to make EXTRA money!

Find Out What N.R.I. Can Do For YOU

MAIL THE COUPON for your FREE copy of my 64-page book. It's packed with facts—things you never knew about opportunities in broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Aviation Radio, other Radio fields. Read the details about my Course—"50-50 Training Method"—6 Experimental Kits—EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS. See the fascinating jobs Radio offers and how **you** can train at home. Read many letters from men I trained telling what they are doing, earning. No obligation. Just MAIL COUPON in an envelope or pasted on a penny postal!—**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5AA2, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.**

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$200 a Month in Own Business—"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start." A. J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

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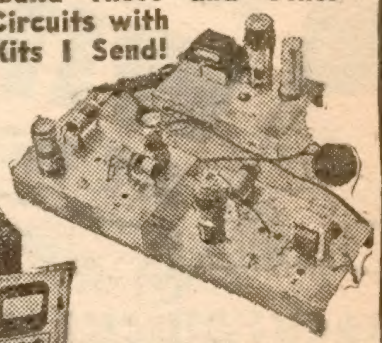
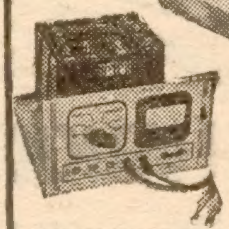
TELEVISION • ELECTRONICS • FREQUENCY MODULATION

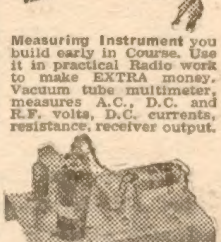
YOU Build These and Other Radio Circuits with 6 Big Kits I Send!





Measuring Instrument you build early in Course. Use it in practical Radio work to make EXTRA money. Vacuum tube multimeter, measures A.C., D.C. and R.F. volts, D.C. currents, resistance, receiver output.

Superheterodyne Circuit. Preselector, oscillator-mixer-first detector, i.f. stage, diode detector-a.v.c. stage, audio stage. Bring in local and distant stations on this circuit which you build!



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EASY! QUICK! DELICIOUS!

What a drink! . . . the richest, mellowest wine you've ever tasted. High alcoholic content, yet so delicate and smooth you'll kick yourself for what you've been missing all these years in real wine enjoyment . . . and — think of it — at only a few pennies a quart. What a treat for your friends. All you do is follow a centuries' old secret formula of the Old World Monastery Monks who were truly master wine makers. Without long waiting, you'll have a supply of the finest wine ever. No fuss. No bother. Ingredients can be purchased anywhere. Your Government permits you to make up to 200 gallons of wine a year — tax free — for your own use. For easy, detailed directions, simply fill in the coupon, attach $1.00, cash or money order, and mail off at once. It will be the best $1.00 investment you ever made.

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How to Make YOUR Body Bring You FAME ...Instead of SHAME!

ARE YOU Skinny? Weak? Flabby?

Will You Let Me Prove I Can Make You a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

What "Dynamic Tension" Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. "Dynamic Tension" does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens — my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the dormant muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY!

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As he looks today, from actual untouched snapshot. Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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Actually, your music lessons cost less than 7c a day. And that includes *everything*—instruction, sheet music, personal Advisory Service. No extras of any kind, nothing more to pay.

Didn't Dream She Could Learn So Quickly!

"I DIDN'T dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. . . . I had always heard it couldn't be done. You can imagine my surprise when after 3 or 4 weeks I found I could play real tunes. Now when I play people will hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time. Any person who takes your piano course and studies it cannot help but learn to play"

—*H. C. S., California.

Easy as A-B-C

No hum-drum scales or exercises, either. You start playing real tunes—from the very first lesson. YOU LEARN TO PLAY BY PLAYING. Every move is clearly shown in charts and illustrations—with accompanying text to lead you easily from one step to another. And what a thrill to hear yourself actually playing popular songs and classical selections! What a surprise for your friends!

Find out about this easy, money-saving method at once. If you want to learn music but are hesitating because you may be drafted, we have made special provisions for those who are called. Mail coupon below for illustrated free booklet giving complete information on how you can learn to play any instrument in your own home. Free print and picture sample included. **U. S. School of Music, 12312 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.** (Forty-sixth year. Established 1898.)

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Look at these notes—they are F-A-C-E. Simple, isn't it? You are already learning to read music. It's easy to play, too. A new invention, the "Note-Finder," locates each note for you on the keyboard.

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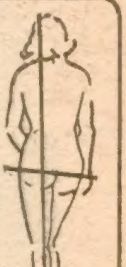

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Vengeance against Miles Vergez, lawman, was all that Dal Casson lived for. And now, Vergez's daughter was a captive of a lobo leader, and Casson saw his chance to strike a crushing blow against her father. Then Fate dealt Casson a joker from its stacked deck!

CHAPTER I

EIGHT years is a long time to wait to kill a man. And then, after thinking you've lost his sign forever, when you stumble on him unexpectedly. . .have him materialize smack-dab in front of your

gun muzzles. . .it is almost too much; it tilts a man's sanity precariously. It's like drawing a fourth ace to three in the hole with your last peso in the pot: hard, very hard, to believe.

Dal Casson savvied that as he stood on trembling poles of legs in the lobby of the Defiance Hill House. He stared through the doorway of the gambling-hall wing. Seated in there, back to him, a back stiff as a ramrod, was Miles Vergez. The lips of his wide, ruthless mouth parted as Casson sucked air. Then he had his gray frock coat shoved back and the Colts already sliding from their black leather scabbards.

But his big-knuckled, dark-haired fingers went like aspens in a puff of hot wind, trembling, trembling. At that moment he didn't have the strength to ear back the gun hammers. Then he put the check-rein on himself. On his mind as well as his quivering body.

For eight bitter years he had planned how it would be. Not in the back or suddenly, without warning! Miles Vergez must be faced and called upon to fill his hand—and then outshot. For being beaten from the holster would break the proud Vergez more thoroughly than any flesh-shredding chunk of lead; would sear his soul. And more, Miles Vergez must know who it was that was smoking him down; otherwise the vengeance would be pointless. When for months on end, years, a man has lain awake through the long reaches of the night with bitter memory for a blanket mate, his plans become very definite.

"That's Vergez, the old law wolf, all right," said one of the pair on the other side of the pillar of the gaudy hotel main room with its glittering chandeliers. It was their mention of Vergez a few moments ago that had tipped off Casson his old enemy was here. Casson had been about to slope out for the border, never to return, convinced he would never find the man he had lived only to kill.

"Yep," said the second of the pair. "Him. Thought I saw him pass some sign to them three Mintoll men before. But not Verges. We won't have to worry about him cutting himself in—less'n it's on our side, Joe. Now if we can just snake them Mintoll jaspers out quietlike. . ."

"Let's get working." They swung toward the front doors of the hotel. Dal Casson turned to see one of them shoot a backward glance. Casson recognized him by the broken nose as an hombre he had seen earlier packing a U. S. marshal's star.

But that was of little importance to him at the moment. The marshals weren't after him. All he cared about was settling the old score with Miles Vergez. He wheeled back to the entrance to the gambling room, then quickly stuck his stub of stogie in his lean sun-darkened face and emitted a cloud of thick blue smoke. Vergez had turned and was staring right in his direction.

But the ex-lawman hadn't seen him, Casson decided after a moment, letting out his breath. Too many people at the corner of the gleaming ornate bar between them. Vergez looked the other way again, half lifting the glass from the table before him. But the picture of his rocky bulging-browed face with the beady eyes that drilled through a man still floated before Dal Casson. Vergez had aged some, but the old hard-bitten bulldoggish quality was still stamped on it as ineradicably as something imprinted in iron.

CASSON moved, throttling the almost overpowering impulse to violent, headlong action. For a moment he felt like a man who has been dragging himself across a desert for unending days and finally sights a waterhole. "Soft, man, soft," he warned himself. If Vergez discovered him before he confronted him face to face, he might recognize him and bellow an alarm. Roar out that this man was a fugitive from the Law, wanted dead or alive. Then—

Ambling on his long lean legs, slim high-shouldered body relaxed, Casson swung in behind a fat gent in a beflowered vest and a bejeweled hostess as they entered the gambling

hall. Defiance was a lush boomtown with that silver strike in the hills behind it. Money was everywhere. Heavy-plunging gamblers, like the fat man with bulging bankrolls, and bejeweled women were plentiful. As Casson stepped into the room there was an uproar as a big winner at the roulette wheel scattered silver dollars to the onlookers.

Gaunt, hook-nosed face locked in an impassive mask, gray flat-crowned sombrero yanked low over it, he leaned against a post, flipping a coin idly in his left hand. He sized up Vergez from the back again, let his gaze drift to the trio of the Mintoll bunch at the table beyond. Casson's gray, flat-set eyes were the only tip-off on what was building within him. They were set and smoky. Sliding his right hand from his pocket so Vergez would see it, he took a stiff stride forward. Another.

Up near the wide double street doors a gun crashed. A man went pitching backward, screaming bloody murder as he dug at a holster. One of the house guards tried to jump in but somebody tripped him from behind. The reeling man got his hog-leg cleared and triggered a couple of slugs into the gilt-painted ceiling. The gent who'd apparently shot him jumped for the doorway, bawled, "You tinhorn cheat!" then busted out into the night. The whole place became a babel of wild oaths and screams.

Something told Casson. He whipped back to check on Miles Vergez again. Vergez wasn't there any more.

At the table beyond, where the three Mintoll men were, the play was being made. The broken-nosed one and the other U. S. marshal were standing behind the trio, Colts drawn and held low. The ruckus in the front was merely a diversion being staged by cohorts of the marshals. One of the latter said something. Hands held slightly out before them, the Mintoll men rose and headed, as directed, for the side door onto the alley. Nobody gave them so much as a look with all attention directed up front.

Instinctively Dal Casson barged forward. He knew Vergez was hooked into it somehow though it didn't make sense. Any Mintoll hombre was an outlaw and Vergez before his retirement had been such a dyed-in-the-wool John Law they said his badge grew on him. Then, beyond the head of a red-haired girl at a faro table, Casson saw Miles Vergez' jutting-shouldered black-clad back disappearing through a doorway in the rear.

Elbowing people from his path, Casson hustled down there and jerked at the knob of the door. Uselessly. It had been locked from the other side. Something like panic clutched at him, choking up in his throat; he had waited a long time for this moment. To be cheated of it now—

He flung himself across to the side door, clearing his gun barrel from the holster as he stepped into the night. Under the overhanging eave it was blacker than the inside of a boot. But to the right the open lot behind the hotel lay dyed in yellow moonlight. Along one side of it the two marshals were marching their three prisoners toward the tree-flanked track that ran along behind the main road. Gun reports spattered through the general hubbub of the boomtown.

They came from the line of trees over to the right. Casson saw the two weapons of the ambusher winking yellowly. The marching marshals were caught on the flank and without cover in the clear moonlight. One, with a fresh bullet hole in his hat, tried to get to the cover of a small rock, but one of the Mintoll men struck him a terrific blow on the side of the head and grabbed his gun as he went down. The second marshal had dropped to his knees to answer the ambusher's fire, but he threw up his hands when he saw the prisoners had the jump on him.

IT WAS all over in a flash. A Mintoll man leaped in and sent the second marshal crumpling with a gun barrel blow across the forehead. Then the outlaw trio raced for

the tree-masked track behind the buildings, one of them waving to the hidden ambusher. In a matter of seconds they had disappeared.

Dal Casson was already sliding along the back of the hotel building, silently praying the shadow hid him. He kept his guns close to his sides so there would be no telltale glitter of steel, because he had a mighty good hunch who it was who'd fired from the screen of trees at the other side of the open rectangle. As he slipped in among the first of the trunks he cursed the jangle of a spur. He moved forward, senses keyed up. Further out to the rear was the squat shape of the hotel horse-shed.

There was a nasty hiss and a bullet chunked bark from the side of a tree inches from his head. Casson was already diving flat as the gun report followed close on it. He bellied sideward to flank the thicket from which the muzzle flash had come. Behind him, men had emerged from the hotel and were probing around cautiously. A raw town, the unwritten law of Defiance was never to go sticking your nose in somebody else's business. And the town marshal himself was out tracking down a horse-thief that night.

Casson rose to his knees, ready to rush the thicket. A horse whinny came from the shed. Then there was the rattle of hoofs on loose stones and a cayuse bolted away from the shed. As it raced into a splotch of moonlight out from under the foliage, the man with one foot in the stirrup flung himself into the saddle and crouched low. Casson, already running, knew it was Miles Vergez.

Luckily he had saddled up his own pony preparatory to leaving town before he took one last look-see around. The roan mare was there when he dashed into the shed after seeing Vergez swing to the left on the track out behind the town. Casson hit the leather and tore after him, confident that when he next caught up with ex-lawman Vergez it would be for the showdown.

He turned into the track, glad that the night wind was blowing full in his face. The sound of pursuit would be carried away from Vergez, but Casson had to overtake him before he joined up with the Mintoll trio.

The track slanted down sharply as the town straggled over the edge of the little plateau and onto the hill leading to the creek. Casson went past the rear of the charred husk of a burnt-out dancehall and reined up so the roan teetered on its rear legs. The flanking trees had stopped and the track lay bare in the moonglow ahead. No rider was on it.

He had it figured in a few seconds, panting with anticipation. The Mintoll men had slipped back into the crowded town somewhere along the route, and Vergez had also cut off somewhere. Casson hauled a Colt from its sheathe as he moved back. It was almost as if he had second sight. He came to the granite outcropping and wheeled the roan along one steep side of it. And there was the narrow path through the brush toward the north. Leaning low from the hull he could see the fresh-cut hoof-prints in it. Half a mile on, the path petered out among sand-hills. But there was a dried-up creek bed gashing the sandy barrens just ahead. As the impatient Casson dropped into it he spied Vergez disappearing around a bend in the old creek course over to the left.

CASSON flung pell-mell after him, primed to smoke it out now. To hell with it if Miles Vergez did spot him! He flung the spur steel to the roan, heedless of riding into a trap. As he rounded the bend, Vergez was looking back over his shoulder at the next curve of the creek bed, but he didn't seem to see Dal Casson. Casson came to the curve, swung around it. Again his quarry seemed to have vanished. Then Casson's gray eyes saw the little side spur, screened by scrub oak and a thorny Joshua tree, that branched off from the bed on his right. Hitting the ground he sent his pony trotting in amongst a patch of boulders and ran to the patch of scrub.

He worked through it in a few

strides and emerged in a tiny pocket carved in the bank of the one-time stream. A ramshackle cabin stood at the back of the pocket. Before it Vergez had dropped from the saddle and stood squinting at the entrance to the pocket, hand on a gun butt. With the other he held a bandanna clamped to one side of his forehead. Blood stained the blue bandanna. He swayed slightly as Casson appeared. Advanced two, three steps.

"Who is it?" the ex-lawman said gruffly. The single bullet that second marshal had fired had nicked him across the forehead.

As he neared, Casson dropped his hands away from his gun butts. A cold feeling of futility gripped him. He extended his right hand with the fingers outspread, the three fingers. The pinky finger and the one beside it were gone, hacked off years ago. Miles Vergez peered, then lifted his beads of eyes to Casson's face.

"Dalton Marcasson," he cried. He was plainly astounded. Then: "I—I—dammit, man, I'm right glad to see you!"

Casson wondered if Vergez had gone locoed. Casson felt the sweat bathing his face, the almost deafening pulse of the blood in his veins. He had been living a long time for this, rehearsing it in his mind over and over endlessly. For a moment he thought he would choke with the spate of passion welling inside him. Then he felt himself nodding to Vergez' identification.

"Yes, me, Vergez. I've ridden a long trail to see *you*—and to kill you!" The last words ripped from his twisted mouth. Sand flew up as he flung his legs sideward in the gunman's stance. "Fill your hand, you damn badge-packing wolf! This is the payoff, you—"

Vergez had already groped up with a hand for the saddle horn to steady himself. The arrogance faded from his rocky face and it went gray under the moon. He shook his head. "Go ahead and shoot away, Marcasson! It don't make much difference. Go ahead—kill me. . ."

CHAPTER II

DAL CASSON, one-time Marcasson, couldn't shoot; he knew it. He never had been able to kick a man when he was down. And Miles Vergez was down now, whipped, somehow broken; Casson realized that. Vergez was neither bluffing nor afraid of him. Something had knocked the props from under the man.

A wave of contempt for his own weakness rolled over Dal Casson. He had every right to blast this man down as he would a crippled coyote that had bitten him once. His lean face darkened with the tide of fury.

"Go ahead—whine, Vergez! Snivel like a mongrel! Beg for mercy—but, by grab, if I have to gun you in the back I'm a-going to give it to—" He broke off at the faint tinkle of a bridle chain. Some rider out among the sand-hills was nearing. Casson leaped forward and wheeled the unsteady Vegez around and pushed him toward the door of the shack.

The latter shoved the door open and entered. Casson stationed himself to one side with his back against the wall and waited, wondering if it might be some of the Mintoll men coming. Then he caught the steady sand-muffled sound of pony hoofs going off to the west. They died. Vergez called to ask if it was all right for a light. Dal Casson waited till the candle in a bottle neck flamed up on the table, then went in, toeing the door closed after him. He had a levelled gun with hammer eared back. But Vergez stood over a water pail in the corner, mopping at the gash on his forehead.

"Any time you're ready to pull the trigger, go ahead," he said wearily. He finally turned and kicked back a box on the dirt floor and dropped down at the rude table. "You'll find a pint of redeye behind that sack of beans on the shelf," he said.

Casson got the bottle and two tin cups and put them on the battered table. Vergez poured drinks and Casson bestrode a patched-up chair across the table from him, watching like a hawk for a play. He would

welcome any break by the ex-lawman; it would simplify things. But Vergez simply pushed one cup toward him, still holding the bandanna against the forehead gash. Took a slug of his own drink and nodded slightly.

"So you finally caught up with me, eh, Marcasson?"

THE bitter hate leaped back into Casson's gray eyes. That name, his family name by birth, reminded him of all he'd gone through before he was forced to change it. He nodded slowly. "And I don't have to kill you. . . I can do something worse, Vergez. I can leave you trussed up and go into that town and tell how you helped those Mintoll men—outlaws—to escape. The marshals would be delighted to know who pulled that one. Ain't nothing lower than a John Law who turns bad and sells out his badge, Vergez!"

Vergez laughed, not loudly but with his old mockery in it. "Who'd take your word against mine? Eh, Marcasson?"

"The name's Casson now. Just Casson."

"All right. But you, an ex-jailbird, testifying ag'in me, the man who sent you to the Big House! They wouldn't say you was prejudiced, would they? They wouldn't think you was trying to get revenge, huh?" He laughed in that quiet way that had made men say, in the past, that he had no nerves.

Casson came half out of the chair and lunged across the table. Then he dropped his fist; he couldn't hit a hurt man. Vergez lowered the bandanna from the cut in his forehead, that had stopped bleeding, as if daring him. Some of the older man's pride was creeping back. Casson said thinly:

"That would stick all right — if they hadn't captured one of those Mintoll gunhands when I was coming down the track after you, Vergez. Reckon those marshals'll have ways of making that hairpin unbutton his lip and tell who got him free . . .'specially when I bring you in."

Vergez went green. The beady eyes seemed to be sucked into his skull and his lips broke and trembled. Then he clamped up his mouth, the old bulldog quality in him coming to the fore. His gnarled hands gripped the table edge. He spoke heavily.

"I'll face you now, Marcasson. . . Let's go and smoke it out!"

Casson reared up from his chair, cold satisfaction lighting his face for a moment. It waned as his eyes drilled deep into the ex-lawman. Something told him. Perhaps it was his hate that made him know this Miles Vergez so well; perhaps it was the hours of planning his vengeance, of thinking of this man and how he would kill him. And then also there were the bits of information picked up in the long fruitless months of trying to track down Vergez. Anyway, he knew that Vergez had picked the lesser of two evils. Knew, too, that, for some reason, Vergez was going out there to die. That he had it planned that way.

Dal Casson, when in prison, had seen a man go out to be hanged, a hard-case hombre proud of his nerve. He hadn't flinched. But there had been the dead light of a doomed man in his face. That look was on Miles Vergez now.

"No. . .no," said Casson. "Like hell we will! It'd hurt you less to die. I can see that." Then he whipped around the end of the table and snatched Vergez' gun from its holster. Gave him a shove in the chest to send him teettering backward on the box and frisked him for a hideout weapon. There was none. He slung the .45 into a corner and went back to his chair.

"You hate me, don't you?" Vergez said wearily.

Casson spat onto the floor and laughed harshly into the older man's face. "Hate you? Hell, I never really knew what the word meant till I met up with you, Vergez! And now I despise you as well—you, the lawman who has gone bad! Just a plain rat at heart! I'm going to drag you back to town and expose you for—"

"I tried to square things, Marcasson," Vergez said.

"What-t? You tried to—why you damned old liar, you—"

Vergez nodded. "I did. At the trial, I realized—well, I got thinking afterward. And I knew—somehow—you wasn't guilty."

Casson's hand tightened around his gun atop the table so that the knuckle bones stood out whitely. Fury sent the breath whistling between his lips. Those last words brought it all back. How he'd sloped into Hopewell with a stake, the savings of two years' cowhand wages bolstered by a lucky killing in a stud game. Been planning to pick up a quarter section of his own. And then Vergez, a special State officer from the governor's staff, had seized him on a charge of having participated in the big stage holdup a week back, claimed he was a member of the Whitey Borman gang.

AT THE trial, the chunk of dinero had been evidence against him. His claim of winning in a stud game had been derided. Having been riding the trail for weeks, he had been unable to establish any alibi. And then Vergez' testimony had been the clincher. The John Law had sworn that when he had a brush with some of the Borman outfit in Big Skull months ago he had seen one man with two fingers missing from his right hand. That man, he swore in the courtroom, was Casson. In vain had the latter protested he'd lost them two years ago taking a dally around a saddle horn. He had been convicted and sentenced to State prison.

Vergez, one hand rubbing a gray-fringed temple, went on. "Yes, after the trial I got to pondering on it. You were too damned guilty for it to be right. A guilty man wouldn't have been such a chunkhead as to claim he picked up his dinero in a card game with strangers. A guilty gent would have had some alibi, somebody to step forward and say where he'd been. And that Borman bunch, they had political connections. They'd beaten me outa a conviction once before by putting forward a witness to alibi for one of their men. After you went off to prison, I got to thinking on them things."

Dal Casson was back in the shack again. "Plumb sweet of you, Vergez," he said bitterly.

The ex-lawman didn't seem to hear him. Went on talking slowly. "Yes . . . So I started checking back on my own. Hunted down the trail and found that place where you'd cleaned up in the poker game. One of the other players had died. Two had just been passing through and disappeared. But the bartender remembered you. Seems you gave him five dollars just as a friendly gesture after you'd won. Only," Vergez sighed heavily, "his story wasn't worth nothing in the eyes of the Law and courts because he'd done time for rustling."

Casson spilled out fresh whisky in the cups. "In the court room, when I said it had been that way, you laughed with the others!" He was sweating heavily. It was hard to sit across from this man whom he had dedicated his life to killing—and not kill him.

Vergez sat tracing a pattern aimlessly in the dust of the table top. "I kept working on it. There was a blacksmith in Quentin who shoed your sorrel. That was the day before the holdup. Sixty odd miles away. Which meant you couldn't have been at the hold-up. The blacksmith was stabbed to death in a barroom fracas the night before he was coming back with me to testify."

Casson's teeth met with a click. He hated believing any good of Vergez. "Shut down, Vergez. You *didn't* get me outa prison. And now—it doesn't make any difference any more! I came here to settle with you and—"

Vergez' fingernail grated as it hit a rusty brad in the table top. "Then something real happened. I ran into Whitey Borman, gunned it out with him and captured him. As he lay on his death bed he told me how your trial had been a great joke to his bunch."

"I almost died laughing myself," Casson snapped.

"They had a fella riding with them

at the time. . .fella called Three-Finger Quinn. He was the one I saw at Big Skull—and thought was you, like I said at the trial. He had been in at the holdup."

Casson sat tensed with his jaw slack. Something like hope gripped him. Maybe he had been cleared. . . could quit the owlhoot. . .

CHAPTER III

MILES VERGEZ straightened up and shook his grizzled head. "I wrote a confession for Borman. But he never learned to write, couldn't even sign his own name. By the time I'd gotten witnesses for his mark—well, he had cashed his chips."

Casson swung the chair out from beneath his crotch, rising. "You're breaking my heart, Vergez. But it's time for the payoff."

Vergez looked up with something close to pleading in his eyes. "I went to my superior officer and told him what I'd learned. It wasn't real evidence though."

Casson gestured with his gun barrel. "On your hind legs, Vergez!"

"Then I went up to the Big House to see you and tell you what I was going to do and—but—you'd just gone."

That sent Dal Casson's thoughts into the past again as his eyes smoldered with the memory. There had been a prison break. He had been one of the bunch that busted out, but his horse had been shot under him and one of his arms broken in the fall. Afoot, starving, more dead than alive, he had skulked in the foothills with the prison posse hounding him. Finally, desperate, half crazed, he had ventured into a settlement for food. A bounty hunter had fired on him and put a slug in his other shoulder, crippling that arm. And it was that night as he dragged himself into a draw that he heard the bloodhounds baying in his wake.

That night the convict traveling with him, a fellow called Little Mex, had cracked, thrown away his gun and said he was going back to surrender. Somehow, arms useless, he himself had staggered on and evaded the hounds till dawn came. He had never known a man could feel such fear. Then, just at sunrise they had gotten him hemmed in against the top of one side of a precipitous canyon. He had known it was the end even when he foundered upon the railroad tracks that ran out onto the trestle that spanned the canyon. He had seen a posseman run across a clearing toward the end of the trestle a few moments before, but there was no other way for him to go.

He'd gotten down opposite the big boulder that stood beside the head of the trestle. Crept forward, hot breath knifing his lungs as he held it. There had been the scrape of a spur from the other side of the huge rock. And then the mournful blood-chilling bay of the hounds had sounded from the hollow behind him; there was no alternative but to try to cross the trestle.

He could see again how the steel rails had winked evilly at him in the sunlight, and the way the brown cross-ties had swum and blurred beneath his glazed eyes. Far below, a good hundred feet, was the fast swirling stream in the bottom of the canyon. And always that itchy feeling in his back as he waited for the bullet to crash into it. Knowing he had no chance of escaping, he almost wanted it to come. He had felt like a hunted animal, a maimed crawling thing about to be stamped out, unable to lift a hand in his own defense.

Then, somehow, he was across the trestle and was dropping a-quiver into the high grass at the other side. He knew he could go no further. He had waited for them to come and get him. Only—they hadn't come. When he finally raised his head over the grass, he saw the posse with the leashed hounds disappearing around a bend in the track across the canyon, going away as if their job had been completed.

He blinked as if dispelling a mirage and his eyes froze as they rested on Miles Vergez once more. There had been two years of hell after that. Hiding out, waiting for his arms to

heal. They had been almost powerless at first. He'd had to build them up and learn how to sling a gun all over again. And then had come the long, long hunt for Vergez that had ended this night. Vergez, the toughest man-hunter in the state, had turned in his badge, resigning under mysterious circumstances, so the rumor went; he had disappeared. But now—

"I WANTED to tell you what I was going to do," Vergez said again. "That I was going to resign and why I was—" He stopped talking.

"Let's get headed back to town," Casson snapped. It was a bluff. The former John Law was right, Casson knew. Nobody in Defiance would take the word of an escaped convict, a wanted man, against that of Miles Vergez. But he had seen how the idea of being taken in had made Vergez go green, and he wanted to see his old enemy crack. Wanted to make him break and have him grovel. Perhaps then, in desperation, Vergez would make a gun play. Then he could blast him down like a man and get his satisfaction.

There was a low two-note whistle on the night. Vergez galvanized like a man whose name has been called. At once Dal Casson knew it was a signal of the Mintoll bunch. Then there was the shuffle of boots in sand as a man approached. Casson had already glided toward a front corner of the shack, the one farther from the door.

"See him!" he whispered grimly to Vergez. "Act like everything was all right. But try to give him a signal or a sign. . .and if you let him in, you'll be the first to stop lead!"

Vergez nodded and moved heavily to the door. He pulled it open and said, "Hello, Rip." The hidden Casson could see the front of the brim of a white sombrero projecting through the doorway in the candlelight.

Rip said, "Howdy, Vergez. Everything all right? I heard the marshals tried to grab three of the boys and— Hey, who you got in here with you?" Vergez started to say something. A long arm pointed past him to the two cups of redeye on the table.

Then Rip jammed Vergez backward and leaped in with a drawn gun whipping around. He was a tall pinheaded man with bleak eyes in a face red as raw meat. Those eyes dug Casson out of the dimness in a split second. And the gun nose beneath them was spitting lead past Miles Vergez' shoulder.

For a split second, when he'd stepped in, Rip had been at Dal Casson's mercy. Casson could have blasted him easily. But the unarmed ex-lawman had been in the way, would have stopped at least one bullet with a certainty, and Casson had held his trigger. Now lead chunked into the wall beside him. Another ripped the skin of his left forearm as he sidled swiftly to get an angle where the helpless Vergez would not be between him and the newcomer.

Then the former John Law, always a deadly cool one, dropped to his knees so he no longer shielded Rip. Casson's right-hand Colt snarled twice like exploding thunder in the confines of the walls. Rip skidded backward almost to the door, then buckled. He went down with his chest split and another bullet in his neck, his heart stopped before he settled to the dirt floor.

Verges stared down at him, then let out a groaning sound. "My Gawd! That's Rip Seward, Mintoll's right-hand man! When—when they find him they'll—they'll kill—" his mouth hung open wordlessly.

"You?" Casson prodded, ready to gloat.

"No-o. Not —me. *My* daughter . . .Beth. . ."

CHAPTER IV

THAT name, Beth, catapulted Dal Casson into the past once again. Beth Overholt had been the name of the girl he had planned to go back and marry once he got established on his own place. His arrest by Vergez had killed all chance of that. It was while he was

in prison that he'd learned she had married another man.

Then he came out of his brief reverie and went into action. His own safety was the first thing. Others of the Mintoll band might be following the boss' first lieutenant in here; he didn't intend to be caught with Rip's dead body and burned down by a bunch of lobos. He grabbed up Vergez' smokepole, thumbed the shells out of it and tossed it to the now haggard ex-lawman. "Git outside!" he ordered. Then he pinched out the candle, threw the tin cups into a corner and followed. Motioned Vergez into the saddle and swung up himself. They pushed through the screen of brush into the creek bed. Aside from the muted din from the boomtown, the night was still. Nobody was in sight. Vergez mumbled something and wheeled his cayuse and sent it flinging back into the pocket. He swung it back and forth in front of the cabin, circling and cutting so the tracks would look as if a party of riders had been there.

"There," he panted when he returned, ignoring Casson's bared Colt that had jerked up to cover him. "My story'll be that I heard somebody snooping around and cleared out. And Rip must've rode in and been mowed down by this bunch, maybe a marshal's posse."

Casson sneered. "For a hairpin whose hours are numbered you sure do a heap of worrying about *who's* going to give you a ticket to Hell!"

They swung down the creek bed. Where the banks lowered, the ex-lawman swung his pony up one side. "Let's get clear of here. Might meet more of 'em sloping in." He seemed to have shed all fear of what Casson might do to him, seemed interested only in making himself look innocent in the eyes of the Mintoll bunch.

THEY twisted through the sand dunes, passed through an elbow of mesquite jungle and came to the creek beyond the town. When they crossed it Casson ordered a halt in the cover of the cottonwoods on the other bank. He had been thinking as they rode, planning a new method of revenge. And the scream of the train whistle up in the pass behind the town had given him his cue. It reminded him of that trestle over which he'd fled in the nightmare of that escape from prison.

"Well?" said Vergez hoarsely.

Casson's thoughts had drifted an instant. There was that one thing he'd never been able to understand. That was the posse deputy lurking behind the rock at the head of that trestle. To this day he had never been able to figure out why that man had not put a slug between his shoulder-blades as he floundered his way across the railroad ties. It was a miracle and a mystery.

"Oh. . ." He came back to the moment. He couldn't take Vergez back to town and have him exposed as a rat who'd betrayed the Law he'd once upheld. The shame alone would have broken Miles Vergez; but Casson's word as an ex-jailbird would have meant nothing. Now, he had another idea.

"Got a smoke?" he asked.

Vergez brought a packet of tailor-made cigarets from his coat and extended them. Tailor-made smokes.... the ruthless incorruptible John Law's only vice, Dal Casson had learned. He took one, fired a match on his thumb nail and took a couple of deep drags on the quirly. Then he pinched it out and held it up before the puzzled Vergez.

Vergez' jaw suddenly shot out. "They didn't capture any of those Mintoll boys—recapture 'em, I mean," he said. "If they had, Rip would have known it and wouldn't have dared come that close to town."

Casson shrugged. "No matter. I got another idea. I'm a-going to leave you trussed up here. Then I'm going back to the cabin and leave this butt —the tailor-made smokes everybody knows you use. Then I'm going into town and tell 'em about you working with the Mintoll outfit."

Vergez' features, that had been touched with new hope, stiffened. Casson laughed at him and continued.

"You won't be there to identify me

as an escaped convict, Vergez. And they'll go on the hunt for you—the way they hunted me once! Yeah! I'll come back here after a spell and let you loose. Leave you go with an empty gun. You'll have been denounced up and down the country. They'll even be a price on your head, a fat one, I hope. Every Joe and Harry'll have an eye peeled for you—and with a proddy finger on his trigger. You'll know what it is to be half starvin' and whupped and have every hombre's hand turned against you! You'll know how it feels to crawl like a wounded animal and—" His voice tore in his throat, thin and harsh with emotion.

VERGEZ made a choking sound. "Don't—don't force me outa this part of the country, Marcasson! Kill me if you gotta. But don't—"

"Why? You taken such a fancy to the climate here?"

"My daughter, Beth....Don't you savvy| Kid Mintoll is holding her as a hostage till I do what they—"

Casson cursed. "You ain't got no girl, Vergez! You was never married. You see, I know all—all about you. You get to know a gent when you been studying on him to fix up your revenge. You lowdown liar! You—"

"No—she weren't my own daughter, exactly. She was a waif I rescued from the fire that burnt out Tompkins Run the time of the big drought. Nobody knew who her folks were. Seemed they got killed in the fire. So—so I adopted her." After she'd grown some he'd sent her to boarding school in the East. Used to drop his law activities twice a year to go visit her. Two years ago she'd come home to live with him on the little place he had up on Big Squaw Creek!

Vergez' mouth twisted. "I couldn't uh loved her more if she was my own."

Then Kid Mintoll had stumbled on his place. Mintoll had an old score to settle. Vergez had sent up his cousin who, a lunger, had died in prison. Mintoll had kidnapped the girl, Beth Vergez, to hold as a hostage. And then he had dictated his terms to Vergez.

The listening Casson scowled. "They say you never made no dinero outa being a John Law."

"That's right, that's why I'm here working with the Mintoll bunch. I—I gotta do what they say."

"Yeah?"

Shame and disgrace stained Vergez' bulldoggish face. Mintoll was preparing to hold up the whole boomtown of Defiance, to hit it one night and sack every barroom and gambling hell as well as the bank. It was going to be the biggest job of its kind the Southwest had ever known. But the bank angle was something the outlaw leader, Kid Mintoll, needed help on. A heavy load of specie, the payroll of the three big mines in the hills, was due in on the railroad sometime during the week, but it had been kept secret. Vergez' assignment was to learn when it was due in and to get himself selected as one of the guards when it was rushed to the bank.

"That'll be easy for me—with my past rep," he said sadly. "I already know it'll be sometime late tomorrow. When I know the definite time, I give the signal to some of the Mintoll boys in town and...." He leaned from the saddle to clutch at Casson's bullet-gashed forearm that he had bound up with a neckerchief. "Don't you see. I ain't got no choice. I gotta do it. If you force me to flee the country—I—Gawd knows what'll happen to my Beth. Mintoll's got an awful rep with women. He seems to hate 'em."

Dal Casson's face remained adamant. He knew about Kid Mintoll though he'd never crossed his trail. Mintoll was more than an ordinary bad man or killer, or a gent too lazy to work who'd been forced onto the owlhoot trail by some misadventure. Mintoll was dinero crazy. When he got orey-eyed he liked to sit with a pile of bills before him and finger them endlessly. They said he had money cached in three states and still wasn't satisfied. More than once he'd risked capture when, having eaten and drunk in a place, he hauled a hogleg sooner than pay his bill.

Plain locoed over money, that was

Mintoll. Though inheriting a well-stocked small outfit, he had gone lobo to get his hands on dinero faster. Checking those facts a new idea began to shape itself in Dal Casson's twisted mind. Thus far he had been frustrated in his scheme of vengeance. Vergez had failed to haul gun-steel and smoke it out with him as he had expected. He couldn't turn the double-crossing ex-lawman over to the authorities. This new scheme began to build inside him as he thought of that Beth he had intended to marry.

"Listen," Vergez was pleading. "I did my best to try and clear you after I was convinced you was innocent. I did everything I could. And I finally...." Again he broke off as if afraid to tell.

CASSON was unaware of it. His Beth, the daughter of a two-bit rancher, had inherited a chunk of dinero from some forgotten uncle. Enough to make her a wealthy woman. But Casson had refused to marry her and share her money till he had an outfit of his own; he hadn't wanted to live on her windfall.

"Windfall," he said softly on the night. He began to see how he might get his vengeance, now, on Miles Vergez....Vergez who always had had an instinctive undying scorn for any law-breaker. It was a devious scheme, a little locoed. Casson never suspected that the years of festering hate for the man who had condemned him unjustly might have done something to his mind. The thing was an obsession. Nothing else mattered in the world; and with the passing of time the craving for revenge had mounted like a drunkard's thirst, had taken him over body and soul. Merely killing the trapped ex-lawman would be almost a kindness to him now, he realized.

"Look," Vergez was saying again. "I—I help Mintoll pull this off and then Beth is free. After that, you can do what you please. Even turn me in! Yes-s. But I got to get her away from Kid Mintoll and—"

"Where has he got her?"

Vergez' shoulders sagged discouragedly. "I don't know."

"Where does Mintoll hole up? Where's his hideout?"

Again Vergez shook his head. "He's a slick one. All I know is that he operates through the General Store down at the crossroads settlement. You know the crossroads down to the south where the three trails come in?"

Casson was surprised as he nodded. "That place? The store with the big gilded horseshoe hung over the front doors?"

"Yep. I told you Kid Mintoll was slicker'n slobbers. He's been planning this thing. An' some months ago he had one of his men, Sad O'Neil, buy the place and run it, all respectable-like. Mintoll operates through it; it's like a depot for him. Nobody'd suspect a General Store or its owner."

"I see. . .What's this girl of yours, Beth, look like?"

VERGEZ drew deep on the quirly he had lighted up. His voice warmed beneath the soft-swishing cottonwood tops. He said she was pretty as a spotted pony. Not big but slim as a willow switch. Hair like a dark cloud over a pert face. "And when she smiles, her eyes—"

"Don't go gushy, Vergez," Casson chopped him off. The words made him see his own Beth, irretrievably lost to him. "I wanta be able to recognize her. Any marks or—"

Vergez sat staring from the saddle. But he answered. "Why, yes. Yes. She wears a locket around her neck. I found it on her when I got her out of that fire. The locket is gold and shaped like a heart, and inside is the picture of a man with a mustache. Her real father, I reckon. She—"

"That's enough."

"Why do you want to know these things?"

"Because I'm going to find her. . . Vergez, I'll make you a deal. If I get her out of Kid Mintoll's hands, will you do anything I say? Anything!"

Vergez stiffened. At first he didn't

believe. Then he saw deep into Dal Casson's eyes and shoved out his hand. "Yes—anything! I swear it!"

"If I wanted a man killed maybe. . ."

The ex-lawman swallowed hard. "Yes, I'd kill him for you. . . *Anything*—if you get her away."

Their hands met for the first time. With a short cruel laugh, Casson wheeled his pony and spurred it. "Go back to Defiance and wait for me, Vergez. . . Remember—'anything!'" And he headed south for the crossroads where the General Store that was a front for Kid Mintoll stood. . .

CHAPTER V

THE moon was like a crescent-shaped aperture in the wan blue roof of sky as Casson drove the laboring roan to the crest of the hill. Ahead and below lay the crossroads with the long shed-like structure of the General Store in the V formed by the intersection of two of the trails. Behind extended the white ribbon of the road from Defiance in the night. Out of the wooded hollow at the foot of the hill in the rear tore a line of riders coming pell mell. At sight of Dal Casson limned against the horizon shots broke from the lead horsemen.

Casson grinned grimly, a reckless light that was almost inhuman dancing in his gray eyes. He spat scornfully as slugs horneted by over his head. Then he cut the roan over behind a spike of rock that jutted beside the road. Dropping from the saddle he moved to one side of the upright slab and slammed a few chunks of lead down the slope. The first rider grabbed at his sombrero as a bullet ricocheted screamingly from a trailside tree, then wheeled and high-tailed it back down the hill. Another veered into a stand of scrub pine. The next pair lit running to head for the brush.

Spasmodic shots spattered around Casson's rocky bulwark. They were creeping up through the brush and grass to throw a ring around him. He answered the fire, forcing one man to dive flat with a curse on the night as a slug whined a scant inch from his sombrero. Then Casson sighted a handful of them as they bolted ponies into a gully on the hillside far over to his left. Reloading swiftly he leaped back into the saddle and flung out into full sight an instant. He waved derisively and turned to plunge down toward the crossroads. Behind him the night rattled with the storm of gun reports.

"Come on, you chunkheads!" he cried as he rode, even slowing as he came onto the little flat at the crossroads. It was part of his scheme that the pursuers should be close when he passed the General Store. He turned westward along the narrowest trail that dropped into a small well-wooded valley, entered it after being certain the bunch pounding down the hill had sighted him. Their bellows told him they had. A hundred yards inside the valley, momentarily hidden by the hulk of the store, he came to a wide shallow creek. Midway across it he dropped into the boot-high water and cut the roan across the rump with his quirt. The pony leaped clear to the far bank in surprise, then lifted its tail and galloped with empty saddle on along the trail. It vanished around a hummock where cottonwoods flanked the road. Casson turned and pushed upstream through the water and around a curve out of sight.

IN A COUPLE of minutes the pursuing bunch slammed into the stream, hard-pushed horses splashing noisily. They never hesitated, shoving right on up the valley, one of them sending a shot at a deceptive shadow ahead. Casson waited until they passed the hummock, then moved from the red willows. Back down the trail he moved swiftly, eyes locked on the store building. A faint sliver of light gleamed wanly from a rear window as if a shade had been inched aside, then was gone.

He went by a horse shed, crouched low, and moved past a tumble-down deserted cabin with gaping windows a couple of hundred feet from the rear of the store. Up in the valley two shots sounded as the hunters,

wary of an ambush, drilled lead into another mistaken shadow. Casson smiled and moved in on the back door of the General Store. That ragtag posse was part of his stage dressing. With cold daring he had staged an abortive hold-up of a whisky mill at the bottom of Defiance Hill on the bank of the creek there. Strode into the two-bit hole and jumped his hoglegs on the crowd. He had seized some money from the bar, put a couple of wild slugs into the ceiling, then, apparently scared, had leaped through a side window to where his pony was ground-anchored in an alley. He might have beat it to the rear and lost himself out among the sage-dotted dunes. Instead he had cut onto the main road and deliberately drawn pursuit before he fled the town toward the crossroads.

It was his aim to be branded as a lobo fugitive by Sad O'Neil, the General Store proprietor. Now he glided up the steps of the loading platform and beat on the back door of the store. At first there was no response. He drummed with the heel of a gun butt, calling out several times. Then the door swung inward without warning on well-oiled hinges; the yellow glow of a lantern that had been placed just inside the doorway flooded out on Casson, half blinding him.

"What the hell do you want?" called a guarded voice from the dimness of a storeroom redolent of manila hemp and molasses and tobacco.

Uplifted arm shielding his face against the glare, Casson caught the gleam of gun metal some feet straight ahead. Over on the right a boot creaked, and he knew two men had him covered. He lowered his own smokepole.

"Let me in! Hide me—'fore they hang me!" he husked, putting fear in his voice.

"What the devil do you think we are, outlaws?" snarled the guarded voice. "What were they chasing you for, jughead?"

"They're after the wrong man," Casson answered, casting a worried glance over his shoulder at the valley. "Honest! They say I held up a joint. But I didn't—I swear it. Honest! Some damn deputy recognized me and—well, I did do time for rustling once. So—" He swayed against the doorway as if exhausted. His bandaged arm added to the illusion. "Then my pony went lame...."

"Come in—and keep your dewclaws on top of your head!" said the voice straight ahead.

Casson moved in. The door was closed and barred behind him. A gun muzzle nosed into his back. He was ordered to walk straight ahead, through another doorway to a room behind the store itself. That door closed behind him. A half-seen figure stepped to one side of him, holding the lantern so close to his face it blinded him. An arm came around from the rear and snaked the Colts from his black leather holsters. "Sit down—there!" a sad voice ordered.

Casson obeyed, dropping onto an upright sack of flour. The lantern was put on a wall hook and he got a look at the other two. One of them was a little wizened-up gent, fully clothed aside from his boots. He looked like a two-headed gnome beside the big .45 he gripped. The other was Sad O'Neil, owner of the store, a tall stooped man. The light of the guttering lantern danced on his bald egg-shaped head. He was naked aside from a pair of jeans, holding one gun with another tucked inside his waistband beneath his hair-matted chest. Between his sullen mouth and red-rimmed eyes that curved downward at the outer corners he seemed perpetually on the verge of weeping.

"What's your handle, stranger?" he demanded, settling on the rung of a ladder leading to a loft above.

"Casson....Look, I got dinero. I'll pay you well to keep me hid out. Sell me a pony in the morning and—"

"You did pull a hold-up, didn't you?"

CASSON let his eyes run around, then nodded. "All right. Yeah. I saw a card shark there who'd colddecked me once and— Look, I'll pay a heap. They'll string me up pronto.

That daggone deputy claims I killed a gent once and—"

Sad O'Neil sneered. "You probably did, ya trail bum....Don't know why I should let you stay. I can get in trouble myself and—"

Dal Casson slid his ace into the game subtlely then. "Aw, I'm riding in a streak of plumb bad luck," he whined. "I sloped in to try to find a hairpin called Vergez, Miles Vergez."

O'Neil's sagging Colts jumped level as he went on guard. "What'd you want to see that one-time badge-packer for, Casson?"

Casson looked wary, shaking his head slightly. "I might have cleaned up plenty if I found him." He swore bitterly. "Ran into a gent who told me to see somebody called Kid Mintoll. Said he'd know all about this Vergez. But—"

O'Neil was rigid, eyes slits. "Who told you that?"

"Some cull called Rip Se-Seward. Yeah, that was his name, I think."

O'Neil spat into a box of sawdust and went over and took a jug of red-eye from a shelf. He motioned the fugitive to help himself to a drink. "You can stay," he said without emotion. "Maybe, come morning, we can find this Mintoll for you."

Casson bedded down on a thin tattered blanket up in the loft with instructions to make no sound regardless of what happened. His guns had not been returned to him. He'd heard the bars dropped across the outside of the two doors from the room below. He was virtually a prisoner. Staring up into the darkness as he lay on his back, for a moment he wondered if he were locoed. He had, he realized, just about put his head in a noose. Any one of a dozen things could go wrong. If he appeared in Defiance again there was always the danger of being recognized as the hold-up man of the whisky mill on the creek. And if Mintoll got in touch with Miles Vergez, the latter would have an opportunity to label him, Casson, a double-crosser and have him blasted down.

Tossing restlessly, dozing in cat naps, the thing looked plain crazy in review. All the odds were against him. One man working against the clever Mintoll backed by a gun-slick outfit. Pitting a thin two-bit bluff against a flock of six-guns. Then his resolution steeled. It would be a vicious revenge on the man who'd wrongly put him in the Big House, who'd branded him an outlaw for life. It would bring Miles Vergez to his knees, spirit broken, and wreck his life. Casson swore softly; it was a vow to go through with it if it cost him his head.

Stairs on the other side of the flimsy partition creaked. From the trail outside came the beat of pony hoofs. Then riders were out front and a shot smashed into the sky as somebody called for the proprietor. A lantern flashed in the room below and O'Neil passed through to the front hurriedly. He wore a billowing flannel nightgown beneath which he had a gunbelt and holster buckled. Then Casson heard him unbolt the front door and his querulous voice:

"Whatin tarnation's the idee of getting a gent out o' bed for at this hour, ya danged galoots! The store ain't open now....A fella come in here? Sure. Coupla dozen of 'em! Didn't you know I was runnin' an all-night dance-hall now....Don't call me that ag'in, mister. Well, about ten minutes after you gents went by the other way I did see a gent in a gray coat ridin' down that south trail. Uh-huh...."

The door finally slammed and the riders moved off. Dal Casson sighed with relief and chuckled sardonically before he dozed off. He slept like a cat, ready to spring at the slightest sound. The years since his escape from prison, when he never knew at what moment some John Law might jump him as a convicted fugitive from justice, had done that. It was the creak of the stairs at the other side of the partition again that woke him in the dank gray of dawn. Then Sad O'Neil's bald skull poked into the middle room, looked up toward the loft where Casson lay apparently sprawled in sleep.

O'Neil disappeared and that door closed. Ears keyed, Casson waited for the sound of the back door opening. It was a big heavy-planked portal and outside the wind howled. But no such sound came. Then he heard Sad O'Neil addressing somebody. A thin high-pitched voice answered. After a moment, the door to the middle room was hauled open with no attempt at quietness.

"Hey, Casson! Casson! Come down here! Shake a leg!"

PULLING on his boots, Dal Casson went down the ladder and into the storeroom in the rear. He was apparently off guard as he yawned and knuckled sleep from his eyes. But he was primed to dive for that tiny derringer tucked in his boot top that O'Neil had overlooked last night. It might be Vergez, waiting to unmask him. It wasn't.

At the end of the storeroom on a plank between two hogheads, a short, stout figure sat with a cold stub of cigaret sagging from the middle of a fleshy face. The man's body was rolls of soft bulging flesh with dewflaps of it hanging from his chin so that his head seemed to run, without neck, right into his chest. The orb of his face was white despite the yellow light of the lamp and incredibly smooth-shaven for a man. His eyes were dark oily balls, lustrous enough for a woman.

"Here's the gunny," O'Neil said to him. "Like I said, the posse stopped off on its way back and asked 'bout him."

The stout man lazily lifted a plump pale hand in sign of greeting. "Hear you been looking for me, mister. I—" A pack rat scuttled across the floor in a corner. The fleshy man jumped a clean foot, uttering a squeal. The buff-hued conchaed Mex style sombrero beside his other hand on the bench upended and fell to the floor. Beneath it on the bench was bared a .45 with a silver star inlaid in the butt of ivory.

And Dal Casson knew he faced the notorious Kid Mintoll....

CHAPTER VI

HIS BAIT had worked thus far, Casson realized. Emotion welled within him, a great choking sense of satisfaction, at the thought he was one step nearer his diabolical vengeance on Miles Vergez. Then he found his voice, primed to ride out his bluff to the bitter end.

Shook his head. "I was looking for Vergez. A gent said you'd know all about that ex-law wolf." He shrugged. As he drew out a sack of makings and built himself a quirly, he was the picture of indifference. But his eyes had measured the pig-like thin-voiced lobo leader, had taken in the brand-new yellow silk shirt. And the black neckerchief held at the throat by a gold ring. And the black-snake whip carried in a coil about one fat-padded shoulder. Also the oiled-up black hair, worn so long it half hid his ears, its glistening waves carefully combed.

There was something unhealthy, unnatural, about the outlaw chieftain; Casson knew he was as dangerous as a soft-sliding snake.

O'Neil tucked his nightshirt into his jeans and spat into a corner. Mintoll glared at that, then spoke to Casson. "Maybe I do know about this Vergez. What did you want to see him about?"

Taking his time, Casson fired up his quirly, then slowly exhaled streamers of smoke from his nostrils. "Don't give a plugged peso about seeing him at all, that dog," he spat out. "I just wanta know where he keeps that daughter of his, Beth."

There was some prolonged silence with nothing except the creak of the building in the wind. Mintoll and O'Neil exchanged a look.

"Skirt chaser, huh?" Mintoll said with scorn finally. "Well, she is a right pretty piece of petticoat." He blew on the nails of one hand and buffed them carefully on the leg of a spotless gray trouser. "And I might have an idee where she could be found. But...."

Casson sneered in turn. "Skirt chaser? I ain't interested in any-

thing but dinero. And she's worth a heap."

Kid Mintoll rose indolently, making a laughing grimace. "Must be dang powerful stuff you drink, two-bit. Or is it marijuanna? Beth Vergez has no dinero."

Casson lunged forward, pointing with an excited finger, as if he had just sensed something. "You *do* know where she is, don't you, by grab!" He ignored Mintoll's shrug. "Maybe she hasn't got a cent. Maybe she doesn't know she's worth hundreds of thousands of dollars—even more! But her father's—well, he's rich enough to buy the whole damn state since he made that gold strike at Lathrop Station. And Miles Vergez *isn't* her pop. Did you know that?"

Mintoll's oily eyes riveted on Dal Casson. The tip of a very red tongue swished back and forth across the outlaw boss' lower lip. "Yes, Vergez admitted to me he'd only adopted her. He—who's her real father?"

Casson rocked back on his heels, shaking his head. "No you don't. I ain't no fool....But her real pop'll pay a sweet chunk of dinero to learn where she is, the infant daughter he lost in the big fire at Tompkins Run years back. At least, he'll play plenty to the hombre who can turn her over to him. Plenty—enough dinero to set a man up for life in wealth. And I'm going to be that hombre, Mintoll! Me, Casson! Me!"

"How do you know that's the same girl Vergez adopted?"

Again Casson shook his head. "I got my own sources of information, mister....But she's very tiny—and with a lot of black hair. And she wears a gold locket around her neck. If you've ever seen her, you know I'm right. If I only knew where she was—" He had played out the bluff glibly. Everything hung in the balance now.

"I've got her!" Mintoll blurted, poking a tailor-made cigaret into his fleshy mouth. "Her pop made a gold strike, eh....How will you be able to prove it's his daughter?"

Casson said, "If what I expect is inside that locket, I'll have my proof. Then, she can be held and...." He said the rest with a wise smile.

Mintoll returned the smile, baring small pearly-white teeth. "I hold the girl....You've got certain information, Casson....Sad, break out some drinks and rustle up some grub.... Casson, maybe you and I can do a nice piece of business—in partnership...."

IT was mid-day when Casson and Kid Mintoll rode into the little valley back from the store that Casson had led the posse into last night. With them were five hard-case gunslicks of Mintoll's band who had been waiting in the woods. Everything was settled. Dal Casson and Mintoll were going to split on the dinero, the bounty price, the former shook out of Beth Vergez' real father. Now Mintoll was taking Casson out to where he held the girl to make certain of the identification.

"Sure expected the word from Defiance by now," Mintoll said to one of the men. "If that damn galoot lets me down...." He tacked on some oaths. "Rip should've been out here this morning too. If he's hitting the redeye again I'll put a hole in his brain, by God!"

Casson knew whom Mintoll meant by that "damn galoot." Miles Vergez. But Casson's mind was busy with something else. Just before they had departed, a handful of men had tromped into the store. O'Neil had recognized one of them as a deputy sheriff. "Git outa sight!" he cried and given Dal Casson a shove up the stairs of the storeroom that ran to O'Neil's own quarters above. Casson had peeped down from the door of O'Neil's bedroom. Plump Kid Mintoll had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him. Yet that rear door onto the loading platform had not been unbarred, much less open.

The party of men had bought some tobacco and shells and gone off. Casson had been called back downstairs. Still there was no sign of Mintoll. But when Harry, the little gnomelike man, took him out to the horseshed to saddle up a cayuse for him, Mintoll

was hunkered down in a corner of the shed, calmly smoking a cigaret. Now, as they rode, Dal Casson recalled seeing the trap-door beneath the stairs that led to a cellar beneath. He figured there must be some kind of a secret outlet from the cellar by which Mintoll had left. It might be a handy thing to know.

After about an hour's ride up the valley they turned into a spur that forked off it. They drew up and Mintoll dropped a pudgy hand on Casson's shoulder. "You're a right smart jasper, Casson. Not showing anybody your hole card, are you? I mean about who the girl's right father is....Well, I'm right slick too." He pulled out a bandanna and flipped it to one of his men. The latter swung it over Casson's eyes and knotted it behind his head. Then they continued.

Casson figured they'd made one turn to the right. He caught the splash of water as they crossed a feeder creek. Then the rattle of the pony hoofs on stony underfooting. One of the party whistled sharply. A few minutes later the blindfold was stripped from Casson's eyes. He saw they were in an arroyo, on one bank of a hard-baked dried-up stream bed that ran through it. Ahead, where the sandy floor dotted with clumps of brown grass widened, stood a tumble-down ranch in the final stages of decrepitude. Its dobie bunkhouse was boarded up. The barn was saddle-backed with a whole corner of the roof missing. Rank grass had over-run the broken-down fence of the ranchyard. But smoke curled from the pipe of the cookshack off from one corner of the main house to show that it was occupied.

They trotted their ponies up. A lank man waved from the front door, then set a Winchester down beside the doorway. In answer to Mintoll's wcalled query, he nodded, said. "Everything's all right. Why not? But how the hell much longer do we have to squat in this Gawd-forsaken hole of—"

"Shut up," Mintoll said and dismounted. He and Casson went up the rickety steps and into the shabby front room of the place. Mopping the folds of his multiple jowls, the outlaw leader dropped onto a broken-down sofa, cursed at the dust that rose from it, and sighed.

"Some time—and right soon—I'm going to have a place of my own. A big dobie palace. And I'll have it stuffed with servants who can guess what I want next without asking. Damn you, Hank!" he flung at the lank man. "Some drinks. And have the hellcat serve 'em!" He winked at Casson.

Hank clumped up the stairs to the second floor. A couple of minutes later, lighter quick steps came down them. Casson was on guard. But he could hardly restrain a gasp when the girl, Miles Vergez' adopted daughter, walked into the room. She was small, almost tiny, barely a half pint. Yet she was so delicately built he felt a cinch ring would have spanned the waist of her willowy body. His masked eyes went back to the pitch-black gleaming hair that Vergez had mentioned. And the expressive tawny eyes. She wasn't smiling; instead she regarded Mintoll with frank contempt, poised and somehow, though a prisoner, confident in her pride. She had on a riding skirt and a man's faded red shirt the tails of which she had knotted around her waist sash fashion. Though it was sizes too big somehow it seemed to accentuate her lissome body.

"Get some drinks!" Mintoll shouted at her in his thin voice that cut like a whip.

SHE surveyed him and then moved off unhurriedly. When she returned with them, Mintoll downed his in a swallow as if it were water, then ordered her to open up the locket at her neck. Beth Vergez frowned, puzzled, then swung her round full-mouthed face to Casson. He smiled and she shrugged, then opened the locket. Rising, Casson went over. He had to stand close to her to peer at the picture inside the heart-shaped gold ornament. Rising silently, Min-

toll was breathing over his shoulder before he could get in a word.

There was, as Vergez had said, the picture of a stern-faced mustached man inside. Casson nodded. "It's her all right."

The outlaw ordered the girl upstairs. "You sure?" he asked, pacing the room.

"Sure," Casson said as he too strode around. His brain worked fast. Through a window, he had already noticed one bearded gent hanging around the cook-shack. Another had loped down the side of the draw, toting a rifle, after they'd come in. That seemed all beside Hank.

"All right. We might as well traipse along."

Stalling, Casson sipped the last of the warm whisky. He had sold his bluff all right. But now the hand was being played. Each move of his had to be improvised as the cards fell. Though Kid Mintoll was unaware of it, Casson was crowded into a corner now. As he shifted his weight, he felt the derringer in his boot-top. As a last resort....Then he snapped his fingers.

"By grab, I'll need something to prove to her father that I can put my finger on his daughter, Mintoll.... The locket—that'd be the thing." He turned up the stairs.

Moving with a surprising fluid swiftness, Mintoll came hard on his heels....Casson saw he wouldn't get a chance to be alone with her.

CHAPTER VII

IN A BARE bedroom upstairs, half a wall rusty brown from a leak in the roof, the girl sat on a stool by the window. Calm and possessed, an eyebrow lifted inquiringly. Casson sensed a tigerish quality about her.

"Give me that locket!" Mintoll ordered. And when her hand instinctively clasped around it, he moved on her. There was the flat crack of his hand across her mouth, blood driven from her numbed lips, Beth Vergez stumbled backward, but there was no quailing. A ring on Mintoll's finger —glittered in the sunlight as he raised his hand again. His other hand shot out to pinion her shoulder and slam her against the wall. Blood drummed in Casson's head. For one of the few times in years he tasted an emotion that wasn't vengeance.

Before it was finished, Beth sank her teeth in Mintoll's wrist. She was thrown across the cot. A gasp jerked from the outlaw when one of her boot-heels jabbed into his belly. In fury, she ripped off the locket and flung it into a corner. As Mintoll bent to retrieve it, Casson's hand darted toward a wall shelf where a pair of the girl's doeskin gloves lay. Though pale with inner fury, Casson was smiling when Mintoll turned.

"Danged little hellcat, ain't she?"

Mintoll shrugged. "I could tame her so she'd crawl to lick my boots if I had the time!" He fingered the whip wound about his shoulder.

They went downstairs. About to hand over the locket, Mintoll reflected, then drew it back. Opening it, he pried out the picture of the man within, using a thumbnail. Casson protested when the outlaw offered him the empty locket.

"Shut up," said the outlaw in that high-pitched voice that was so strange with his heft. He indicated the tiny cluster of flowers etched on one side of the gold ornament. "Her father oughta recognize it by that. Me, I ain't taking no chances." He lowered a bloated eyelid wisely. "Now maybe I might run into a gent who looks like this picture too."

They remounted and left, Casson being blindfolded once more before they quit the arroyo. He feigned high spirits to disarm Mintoll. "Shucks, fella, we can't miss now. We'll hit the jackpot for a heap. It's like gunning fish in a barrel."

"Maybe," said Kid Mintoll.

When they came into the spur off the valley, they drew up and the blindfold was removed. As he built a smoke, Casson remarked offhandedly, "Don't keep much of a guard over her, do you?"

Mintoll chuckled. "Don't need to.

She won't leave. Not a chance! 'Cause if she does, as I've warned her, it means Vergez himself dies. Neat, ain't it....What I can't figure is how you stumbled on her real father, though. And how you knew it was the girl Vergez had adopted and—"

Casson smiled knowingly. "If it was only a windy—if I wasn't all-fired sure—would I be wasting my time trailing her down?....I suppose you let her have that derringer so she can protect herself from the boys back at the place, eh?"

Mintoll leaped up stiff-legged in the stirrups. "What derringer?"

"Why, I saw one on the shelf in her room."

Mintoll went purple. He check-reined his horse cruelly and wheeled it on its hind legs as he yelled orders. The whole party started back for the hidden old rancho at a dead gallop. And in the excitement, with Mintoll calling the girl all kinds of a double-crossing skirt, nobody remembered to blindfold Dal Casson. It was what he had gambled on.

They slammed along the winding side valley. Beyond a stand of alder they came to a wide-mouthed niche in a bluff that seemed to narrow to a rocky-sided dead end. But when they plunged into it Casson saw that at the far end it right-angled sharply. They had to fall into single file to pass through a low defile. Its walls fell away inside of a half mile and they came into the arroyo where the ranch-house stood.

Mintoll was bathed in a temper-born sweat when they got to the porch and raced up the steps. Casson was hard on his heels when he hit the stairs to the second floor. The girl was bathing her swollen face when they barged in. Mintoll leaped to the wall shelf and threw her gauntlet gloves on the floor, then grabbed up the little derringer. The derringer Dal Casson had planted there before the while Mintoll ripped the locket from the girl. Now he bounded upon her and struck her twice more with his open hand, knocking her across the cot.

CASSON almost strangled with rage but he held himself rooted to the floor. The girl's undaunted eyes swung past Mintoll and lashed him with contempt. Those eyes said more than the lowest names he'd ever been called. Kid Mintoll, chuckling coldly, brushed at a mark on his yellow shirt and led the way out.

"You know," Mintoll figured aloud as they forked their ponies away from the ranch once more, "she was saving that gun for me if I double-crossed her on Vergez! Yeah, that was it! Well, am I going to cross up that damn old hard-shell badge-packer!"

They veered into the main valley and two riders scouted ahead. There was nobody on the trails around the crossroads. Casson and Kid Mintoll went on down to the store. Sad O'Neil was in a bloody sweat awaiting them. One of the bunch had just busted out from Defiance with news.

"Rip Seward was found shot dead in the cabin out in the sand-hills this morning, Kid!" he blurted.

Mintoll spat out his cigaret so hard it bounced off the wall, lustrous eyes a-glitter. "Get the boys in here. I'm slipping into Defiance. Maybe that Vergez is getting slick and double-crossing me. If he is...."

CHAPTER VIII

AGAIN Dal Casson found himself a virtual prisoner. In the waning afternoon Mintoll had gone up the hill toward Defiance. Before leaving he'd had a whispered parley with O'Neil, gesturing toward Casson. Afterward O'Neil told Casson he was to hang around until the boss got back.

The lobo boss wasn't taking any chances. Casson's gunbelt and Colts had been returned to him, but the smoke-wagons were empty and the cartridges had been removed from the belt. One man had been left in the store with O'Neil. And little Harry, the gnomelike one, was seated on a stump out back beside the horse-shed, a Winchester propped between

his legs. Mintoll was taking precautions against his returning to the old ranch and snaking off the girl to collect the ransom himself.

Casson lounged in the middle room just back of the store proper, ignoring the bottle of redeye O'Neil had set out for him. He resisted the itch to pace around; he had to be the picture of an hombre with nothing breeding in him. An hour passed and his clenched hands were wet with sweat. The burly black-mustached gent Mintoll had left behind came back and helped himself to a drink and parleyed a few minutes. O'Neil hovered around the doorway all the time though. Then a small gimlet-eyed man in rusty black entered the store. Casson saw O'Neil flash a warning look to the big gunman.

The stranger bought a jug of redeye. As the Kid watched through a crack in the door, he saw the gent pass the jug around the while he talked about his outfit south of the county line. Then he began to probe, asking questions about men in this part of the country, about who had been in lately. Casson realized the man was one of the U. S. marshals hunting for information, saw that O'Neil sensed it too as he fidgeted nervously behind the counter. The newcomer slouched in a chair by the pot-bellied stove and seemed in no hurry to depart.

Casson realized it was his chance to make a break. Tip-toeing to the storeroom behind he took a looksee at the horse-shed. Harry was still out there on guard duty. Next Casson crept up the stairs and into Sad O'Neil's room, but there wasn't a loose hogleg around. It was when he was coming back down the stairs that he recalled how Mintoll, earlier, had been so magically whisked from the store, recalled too the trap door beneath the stairs that opened onto the dirt cellar. He leaped off the side of the staircase lightly.

The mumbled words coming from his own lips almost scared him. Then he realized he was trying to pray. It was the first time he'd done that since, a bitter wronged man, he had walked inside the prison gates. On his knees he tugged at the trap door in the floor. It opened to show the dim outlines of a home-made ladder leading to the cellar beneath. Casson closed the door as he worked his way down the ladder. Below he struck a match and found a candle atop a packing case. At first he just seemed in a dirt-walled cellar under the rear of the store building.

Then he saw another packing case that hadn't been set true against the wall. Near one forward corner, too, the hard-packed earth was freshly scraped. He pulled out the crate still more, then slid around behind it. It covered a low door rigged in the dirt wall. He wasn't surprised to find a tunnel leading from the other side of the door. He blew out the candle before he moved into it.

He had bumped his skull till it throbbed and rang dully. One of his hands was gashed open by a sharp piece of stone as he stumbled to the floor of the tunnel. It seemed as if it would never come to an end when he found himself thrown to all fours by an abrupt upward slant. He moved up it, smelling fresh air and hearing the wind outside faintly. Then he was pushing at a piece of tarpaulin and his head emerged in what he realized was the dilapidated shack out behind the store. He crept to the half-open door sagging crazily on broken hinges. Just over a clump of brush he could see the narrow back of Harry hunched on the stump beside the horse-shed.

As he bellied toward the bush he could hear the tune Harry hummed. Then he stilled the tune as he bent over the bush and dented Harry's sombrero with a blow of his gun barrel. In a matter of seconds he had the little man's body hauled inside the shed and was trussing him up and gagging him. When he snagged up the cinch band of the saddle on one of the cayuses, he peeped out at the rear of the store. All was quiet there; his absence had not been noticed as yet.

LEADING the saddled horse and the other two ponies there, he slipped out and into the woods back from the shed. There he mounted and pushed for the valley where he sent the two extra cayuses galloping off into the trees. Then he rode hard, reloading; he had taken some .45 shells from Harry's belt.

Thanks to his ruse of earlier that day he found the seemingly dead-end entrance to the arroyo without trouble. He sloped into it unhurriedly, hands well away from his hoglegs, singing out at the house. A rifle slug slithered by two yards before his pony and the *crang* of the gun rolled from the side. Casson halted and raised his hands to shoulder height. The guard appeared from the wooded arroyo side but lowered his Winchester some when he got closer and recognized Casson by his gray frock coat.

"The boss come back yet?" Casson asked cheerily.

"Why, no. He didn't say nothin' about coming back." The man now dangled a short-gun in one hand.

"Well, he'll be along any moment now. That danged girl got word out somehow. The Kid learned them marshals got wind of where she is! We gotta be packing her outa here damned *pronto prontito*, mister!"

The guard's eyebrows shot up. Then he waved Casson on toward the house, trotting a little behind him. Dal Casson, though he knew he was gambling with his life, was half drunk with exultation, even more so than when he had first cornered Vergez in the cabin out in the sand-hills. Now he was taking a long stride toward his vengeful payoff on Vergez. And a far crueller, more satisfying piece of retaliation it would be than merely killing the man. Any doubts he had were shed in the tide of headiness that surged through him. The chance of stopping lead was unimportant against the chance of success.

Hank came out on the porch and as he leaped from the hull Casson repeated his fictitious message. "Mintoll wants you to break camp!"

At the mention of the marshals, the lank man had paled. He ran inside. When Casson got in the front room, Hank was half dragging the girl down the stairs. "Git the ponies saddled up!" he bawled at the guard. "Me, I'm not a-going to be caught in a hole like a damfool gopher. Hustle!"

The girl tore loose from Hank's grip and Casson strode over toward her authoritatively. "How in blazes did you sneak out the word?" he demanded harshly. He tried to give her a quick wink. "Who was the double-crossing snake who fell for that soft face of yours, miss?"

She stared at him and then her eyes began to narrow. Baffled he saw that it was to hide the fear in them. "Double-crosser?" she echoed his words. "You're the one who's working the double-cross! Where's Mintoll? Why isn't he here? He wouldn't let a stranger come alone."

Casson snapped off something about the boss leading a posse on a false trail to the north before he doubled back. Suddenly he understood what had Beth Vergez scared. She was thinking of her father whom Mintoll held. If she left here, as the Kid had warned her, Miles Vergez would die. Casson shot a glance around and saw that Hank stood with a drawn gun. In the doorway at the back corner of the room stood the bearded jasper he'd seen out by the cook shack before.

"How'd you know your way in here, fella?" the bearded one asked suspiciously. Everybody had overlooked the fact that, when they came back and found the derringer, they had neglected to blind-fold Casson.

"The Kid told me how to get in!" he barked back. "Don't stand around jawing—unless you want marshals' handcuffs decorating your dang wrists, mister....Gimme a knife, Hank! I know how to make this filly talk. No woman likes to get her face marked up, does she, dearie?"

Hank lowered his hogleg as he produced a gleaming Bowie knife and extended it. Casson knew he had to keep acting fast before their half-formed suspicions could harden. He

shoved the girl roughly backward against a door to another room and into it. And as he wheeled, apparently to take the knife, his guns flipped up from the black leather scabbards.

THE first bullet was hammered from the Colts of the bearded hairpin. It chopped wood from a chair near Casson's leg. Then his weapons answered. One piece of lead bit into the other's shoulder, sending him spinning through the doorway. A bullet vented Casson's sombrero and he whipped to deal with Hank who'd dived behind a table. Casson's second slug took him in a leg and all the fight went out of the lank man.

He half rose, swaying as he quavered his surrender. Like a tiger, Casson was on him and stretching him on the floor with a gun barrel blow over the forehead. Casson swept toward the doorway whence the bearded gent had gone. A bullet zipped by his ear. A brief storm of lead thundered from Casson's hoglegs. Back in the dim hallway the bearded man crumpled, two bullets in his chest. The ex-convict got to a window overlooking the corral. The guard who'd been saddling up out there was working up through the waist-high grass of the ranchyard toward the front door.

"I've got the drop on you!" Casson yelled. "Wanta surrender or—" He poked out a levelled gun.

The guard took one look at him in the window, terrified eyes batting. Then he turned and dashed madly through the grass and across the floor of the arroyo for the wooded side. Dal Casson spat drily, turned as he sleeved powder smoke from his face. He looked directly into one of the fallen Hank's Colts. It was held by the girl, Beth. It was cocked and very steady. So was her voice when she spoke.

"Don't move....please. I'm a dead shot. Miles taught me well."

He tried to grin. "Are you locoed? I'm getting you out of here, ma'm! I—"

"There's some trick," she cut him off calmly. "When I first saw you, I had hope. I—I thought you were different from those—those others. I don't know what your game is now—but it's crooked." She stamped her foot to silence him when he tried to speak. "What about my father, Miles?"

He nodded, understanding. "I know where he is, and he knows I came here to get you away."

"But what will happen to him when Mintoll discovers I'm gone?" she demanded, inflexibly. "Mintoll said...."

Casson found himself admiring her nerve even though she was as good as the daughter of the man he hated to the core. Somehow, though she was not his blood, Vergez had inculcated some of his icy-nerved iron in her. "I can warn him you're away safe so he can slip out and save his own hide. Come with me—and I promise to do that!" It was a promise he meant to keep too; the vindictive revenge he had planned for Vergez this time depended on the ex-lawman living so he could taste it and suffer for years. When he understood what had happened to his beloved if adopted daughter—

CHAPTER IX

SHE WAS still wary, under lip trembling slightly as her eyes raked Casson from head to spurs so that he flushed up. "You—you have got nerve. . .more nerve than any man I've known save one ....But why? Why are you risking your life to do this?"

Casson wanted to spit out cynical laughter. Instead he smiled enigmatically. "Maybe it's because I owe Vergez an old debt....And maybe it's because I've got a weakness for a beautiful woman. Miles showed me—" He was about to say a picture of her. But the lie stuck behind his teeth.

She smiled a little, pleased at the compliment from him. Then she lowered the gun and nodded.

Out in the corral he completed the saddling of the pony for her. When they galloped down the arroyo he

herded along the other ponies as before. Outside the defile he sent them stampeding into the brush. They rode along the spur to the main valley, stirrup to stirrup. Beth was very pale and she still held the gun she had picked up in the room.

Dal Casson forced himself to forget her beauty for a moment. The wind was rising as the first dimness of sunset thickened. He tipped back his sombrero so the wind caught it and plucked it off. Reining in, he started to swing down from the saddle to recover it. She looked forward again, watching the trail ahead, fearful of the appearance of Mintoll and his bunch.

Casson lunged from the stirrup. One sweep of his long arm and he had her around the waist, pinioning her slim arms to her sides. As the gun slipped from her grip he dragged her to the ground beside him. She fought like a she-cat, twisting and beating and wrenching against his flat body. She clawed for one of his holsters, then raked at his face as he yanked her off her feet. He laughed uglily. Then before he realized it he had one hand in the dusky cloud of hair and twisted her head back. He pressed down on her upturned face and kissed her hard.

They stood a foot apart, facing each other. He realized he had let her go, realized too some kind of shock had hit him to his toes. Over the bitter years since prison he had forgotten a woman's kiss could be like that. And there had been one instant when the little wildcat had responded to his lips. Just in time he caught himself from stammering apologies, remembering his role, his plan.

"So-o." She said it softly yet firmly. And she had not retreated a step from him, gallantly arrogant, he realized. The next moment she had acted. The quirt slung inside his belt was ripped free and slicing at his face. It barely missed, nicking his neck and biting down across one shoulder to tear over his gray coat.

"Oh-h—oh—I didn't mean to—" she started, mouth twisted with horror when she first thought she'd hit him in the face. Then she too remembered her role and lifted the quirt again. He closed in on her and once again locked her arms to her body. He held her so tightly she couldn't struggle this time. She was rigid against him, yet untrembling in the dusk.

"I forgot to mention it before," he said hoarsely. "But I got a price for saving you, ma'm."

Her eyes flashed defiance inches from his. "No....I pay no price. No Vergez ever does!"

"You will!" he answered in a hot angry whisper, hating himself because of the things she was stirring up inside him. His life was dedicated to vengeance. No softer feelings could be allowed to interfere.

She smiled mockingly. "Go ahead. Kill me."

He shook his head. "Not you.... But I can kill Miles!"

Horror froze the smile on her pert face. "You—you did double-cross after all. . . Yes. You swore you'd see he got away from Mintoll but now—"

"I'm keeping my word," he snarled back, trying to still the trembling of his own body so she wouldn't feel it. "I'll see he gets away from Kid Mintoll. Then—you pay my price—or I kill him myself! Take it or leave it!" He tried to crow but this moment of triumph tasted like a mouthful of wet ashes.

Their eyes locked. And he was spitting out in a low hot whisper the thing Miles Vergez had done to him. How Vergez had blasted his life. "Now—I'm going to wreck his...."

"How?"

"He dies unless you pay my price."

"What is it?"

He whipped half away from her and dug a Colt from one holster. There had been a sound like the snapping of a twig underfoot. A long moment passed and nobody came. He looked back at her and hoarsely, bluntly, told her the price. "Don't agree—and Miles Vergez will be looking for a grave before the next sunrise."

HER head fell. "All right," she said finally.

"You promise?"

"I—promise."

He spoke breathlessly. "All right. Out in the main valley, you take the trail up it. Don't worry—you won't meet any of the Mintoll bunch that way. About ten miles up, you'll come to the settlement on Medicine Creek. Inquire for a Mrs. Sebring's boarding house. And stay there with her till I come."

"I will." She turned away heavily.

They remounted. Out in the main valley she turned to the left. He recalled over her shoulder.

"I'll wait for you to come and collect your price, Casson." Then she spurred her pony on.

Casson's laugh sounded a little maniacal in his own ears as he reloaded his guns from the box of shells he'd taken from the arroyo ranch. He forced a louder laugh on the night. This was vengeance, what he had lived for. After the final play, the Law could grab him for an escaped convict and he would still be able to laugh. Laugh loud and long. Now all he had to do was to ride into Defiance Hill and tell Vergez his daughter was free. And tell him too the price his daughter was going to pay for it....

BACK in Defiance Hill, Casson edged into a side entrance of the glittering hotel and sought out Miles Vergez. The latter was at a table tucked in a corner near the head of the ornate bar. He looked like the walking dead, as if only the shell of the man that once was remained intact. The bloodshot eyes lifted vaguely, unrecognizing at first, to the tall Casson as he hovered over the table. It was plain the ex-lawman had been hitting the bottle heavily. Then his bulldog of a face clamped up.

Casson smirked down coldly. In a moment he would let this older man have the shock of his life—smack between the eyes. "She's away, Vergez. She's safe—Beth."

The ex-lawman seemed not to comprehend. He stared at a heavily veined hand, nodding. "Yes, I knew you couldn't do it. But—well—I'm glad to see *you're* alive, anyway." Embittered age was like an overwhelming burden that sat atop his now stooped shoulders.

The one-time jailbird tasted pity for him and wanted to hit him. There was no room for pity in his bleak grim life any more. A picture of Beth with the coal-black hair and yellow-flecked eyes went through his head and made him madder. He squeezed his heart against the re-action that brought, brow clouding. Nothing must swerve him from the retribution that would ease the hunger for hate in him. He swore hoarsely.

"Vergez, I tell you—"

"The game's up," Vergez muttered. "Mintoll's in town. . . He's got the marshals out on some wild goose chase with a crazy story about him being holed up down by Jackson's Hill. The specie's coming in and. . ." His head shook as if he were palsied. This final sellout had broken him. All that had meant anything in his life was being betrayed, denied.

Casson sank long fingers into his shoulder. "Listen. Beth's safe. . . waiting down at Medicine Creek. . ." He withheld telling what she would be waiting for.

Vergez galvanized, then shoved to his feet. His mouth gaped for several seconds. Then his eyes lighted with the old stern fire. He gripped Casson's shoulders, trembling slightly. "You've got her away? She's safe?" Water welled into his eye sockets. "Thank Gawd. . . You ain't a-lying?"

"You got my word, Vergez."

Picking up his glass, Miles Vergez emptied it. The drained look left his face. "All right. You and me—we settle later. I—I owe you plenty. You—"

"Plenty, Vergez. . . You made a promise and your girl—"

"The specie isn't coming in till late—on a special train." Vergez was the law-enforcer of old. "I'll go see Mintoll and learn his plans. . . Yep . . . Then Roberts, the town marshal,

and the rest of us can scheme how to trap that coyote. We'll blast him to perdition—him and his bunch!" He was leading the way through the hotel lobby, hiking up the gunbelt about his middle. "Then, you and me—"

Smiling sardonically, Dal Casson swung in beside him. "Yes. I'll have a little surprise for you, Vergez." It was the cat-and-mouse game and it suited Casson. The cruel streak in him, spawned by the injustice that had warped his life, was content with prolonging the suspense. Let the ex-John Law live in his fool's heaven a spell longer.

THEY got out into the road and turned down it. "But I'll just string along with you, Vergez, to see that there's no double-cross. Remember—I didn't tell you where your girl was in Medicine Creek. Maybe I should've added she's hid out with a pard of mine. If anything happens to me. . ."

Vergez nodded curtly. "You ought to know my word is my bond, Casson. I gave it to you before. . ." He turned into a path that angled down toward the creek. Then into a broader dim alley where the cheaper whisky mills and honky tonks were. There were more houses down here, and boarded-up places like dim-eyed men slowly rotting away, huddled under the black velvet dome of the soft night.

Casson pinched out his stogie and jerked down flat-crowned hat. Had to be careful lest one of Mintoll's men recognized him. Something came to his mind. "Why risk seeing the Kid?" he said suddenly. "You know your girl's safe and—"

"Only way I can make sure of grabbing off the bunch—let 'em make their play. I don't really know where Kid Mintoll himself is down here," Vergez said from the corner of his mouth.

They neared a burnt-out barroom with the dark slimy-looking streak of the creek ahead. Vergez spoke again, whispering. "Just one thing has me worried some. There's a rumor around. They say Jubal Ace is around here somewheres. . ."

Vergez gabe Casson a sign with a quick tap. They both froze in the shadows as the tinkle of a piano drifted from a honky tonk behind them. Down ahead, something that was the figure of a lounging man detached itself from a tree. The pinpoint coal of his quirly arched out and fell into the dust.

"Heard of Jubal Ace?" muttered Vergez.

"Uh-huh." Dal Casson had. Up in the Big House, men, with awe in their voice, called him the King of the Owlhoot. He was more than just popping Hell with his Colts. He was a fantastic character, a man who could drink anybody under a table, then climb a horse and ride like a fury all day. He would roar with wild laughter when he was in a fight, had once broken a man's back with his bare hands. And women were said to go crazy over him on sight. He had the incredible nerve that goes with full complete self-confidence. And he was reputed to have one other thing, a thing that made men's lips tighten when they mentioned it.

Jubal Ace was supposed to have a hypnotic power in his strangely light-hued eyes. "If you ever git cross-wise of him, don't look him in the eye," they warned. "Fust thing you know, you'll feel all sleepy and not able to move—and not even able to think right. He's killed more'n one gent, looking him right in the face. The dead fellas, they never even made a move to shuck their equalizer from the holster. They stood there like unarmed poor chunkheads a-waiting to be put outa their misery. . ." Everybody had known about John Rory, sheriff of Indian Bench.

Rory had walked into a barroom and come upon the lobo king unexpectedly. Rory had started for his hoglegs, roaring at his man to surrender. Then it had been still, with the pair measuring stares. Rory's hand had finally dropped limply. A little while later, Jubal Ace had stalked from the bar and ridden off. When the curious went inside, Rory

lay dead with his own Bowie knife in his chest.

That was the incredible Jubal Ace.

"Uh-huh. I know about him," Casson said again.

Vergez rubbed his nose. "I'll let you in on something. That's why the marshals are swarmin' around here like flies around a down cow. They's been rumors that Ace and Kid Mintoll was still going to have a parley about joinin' forces. If that ever happens—there won't be any power big enough in the hull territory to hogtie 'em. They'll run wild!"

They stood another moment. Verges' mouth hardened in the dark. "I'll be seeing you, Cass." He moved off to down by the charred shell of place and stood and held a match a long moment to the tailor-made quirly in his mouth. The match flare revealed his face plainly.

Casson saw the man from the tree come up. Then the two of them moved off down toward the creek. Blackness swallowed them. A singsong whistle drifted back. Then a door down the line thumped closed softly.

CHAPTER X

FACING each other across a table in the boarded-up place down by the creek in the straggling older part of the town sat Kid Mintoll and Jubal Ace. A low-turned lamp burned on the grease-spotted table. In one of the cracks was the grimy broken-off segment of a playing card. Lurking off in the viscid shadows were three gun-slicks. Two Mintoll's. The other a little mangy-looking cuss, Ace's. There was almost a gesture of arrogance in the setup. As if Ace said, "Shucks, me, I don't need more'n one to back me against this Mintoll."

Kid Mintoll tapped the broken piece of card slowly with his fat fingers. He did it to call attention to his flashing diamond ring. Jubal Ace seemed unaware of it. He picked up the whisky bottle and sloshed redeye into their two tin cups. "Cheap brand of stuff you got here, Mintoll," he said negligently. "Rotgut—and one of the poor grades of it. 'D make a burro spit. Try Crystal River sometime. There's a good brand. But this—" And he raised his cup and proceeded to drain it.

"Never heard of Crystal River," Mintoll said sullenly noticing the drops spilling down Ace's shirt front. The shirt was stained and sweat-streaked to begin with.

"Oughta get around more," said Ace. "Now me, I—" A cockroach ventured up over the end of the table top. With a mighty slap of his hand he extinguished its life. He wiped the hand on the leg of his blue trousers. Mintoll could hardly restrain a grimace of disgust.

A man came in with some news about the town for Mintoll. He also had a message from Sad O'Neil too. O'Neil sent word that that Casson fellow had slipped off. The Kid frowned, then shrugged. It couldn't mean much. Casson was just a two-bit; lost his nerve, maybe. Anyway, there was no chance of his getting the girl out of the hideout. Of course, there was the possibility of the ransom dinero that could be realized on Vergez' adopted daughter. Ace cut in on his thoughts, whacking his thigh.

"What in blazes were we talking about anyway? Hey!" He pulled out a bill and shoved it at the man who was just leaving. "See if you can get us a bottle of good whisky, eh?.... Buy yourself a coupla shots too."

Again Mintoll had that feeling of inferiority. He fired up a quirly of his own and studied Jubal Ace through the veil of smoke. Ace was much bigger, a swaggering six feet of him. Big jutting shoulders that were seldom still; a big alive face, faintly yellow-tinted, with gleaming white teeth like the flash of a saber when he split his lips over them. Sprawled in the chair with new shiny black boots slung out wide like top bull of the pasture. This Ace emanated a feeling of being able to launch into violent action any time, on a split-instant's notice.

And then the eyes. So light they were really no color. Maybe a transparent blue, then again, when his

head moved, maybe gray like a dawn sky before the sun. Sometimes they looked like cat's eyes, turned on you, not seeing you, yet looking right inside you. And then they seemed to be sucking you into themselves, drying up your will power....making you feel dreamy and—

Mintoll jabbed the ash of his quirly against the table edge. It had been happening to him. Ace's eyes had slanted around carelessly, then held his, and that feeling of helplessness had started to mount....The dew of sweat came on Mintoll's forehead. He stared hard at his diamond ring.

"Well, I was just telling about the time I busted open that bank down at Yucca City. Somebody'd tipped 'em and they vas waiting for us with rifles at every winda. Then—"

"Oh, yeah. Reminds me of the time I hit the bank at Avarillo. Same thing happened. Lost some good trigger men that day."

"Avarillo?" said Mintoll thoughtfully. "I know it. But that's a little two-bit burg. Not much more'n a bump on the road. They wouldn't have much dinero in that—"

"That's right. Nothing much. But there's an old woman up the road a piece from the town. Makes wonderful pies. So I figured I might as well knock off the bank after I got a bellyful of grub and kill two birds with one stone." He picked up the whisky bottle and drained it into his cup.

Mintoll's job in the Yucca City bank suddenly seemed very trivial. He fired up a second cigaret to mask his chagrin. "The night I held up the Bleesville stage, it was different. Everything went off slicker 'n slobbers. I—" He saw Ace looking at him in a vague way. "I said everything went off slicker'n slobbers," he repeated. "We stopped it in the gulch and—"

JUBAL ACE pursed his big mouth. "Yep, maybe we could throw in together. I been looking for a real good lieutenant for quite a spell." It was as if Mintoll had not been talking. Ace's mangy-looking gunslick chuckled faintly in the corner.

"'Lieutenant?'" Mintoll shrilled. "Your 'lieutenant'? Are you locoed?"

"No-o, I don't think so. I've heard plenty about you, Kid; I think you'd make a good one. I go in for the *big* stuff and I need a man to help me run things. A good man."

The man came back with the fresh bottle of redeye and Jube Ace slammed off the neck on the table edge. He poured his drink first. The Kid could feel his pasty face swelling with rage but he managed a grip on himself. Leaning across the table he began to speak quickly, in a low voice.

"Ace, you're a big potato, all right. You're a tophand in the game. Nobody's denying it."

Ace's peculiar eyes went slaunchways. "Thanks." It was like a man spiting in the dust for no reason. Just spitting careless-like.

"But, I ain't no grubline-riding tramp asking for a hand-out. I got my own bunch. We ain't starving. Not by a damsight! When I spit on a man's boots, it ain't to shine 'em. Never! It's because I can't reach his face. We could go in together and swing some big stuff—maybe. But I didn't come crawling— and I ain't playing no man's second fiddle." He slapped his plump hand on the table. From the distance came a brief spatter of gunshots. Neither man gave it any heed. They knew they were well guarded.

It had been a dangerous speech for Kid Mintoll to make, dangerous for any man to parley like that to Jube Ace with his violent unpredictable temper. Ace sat scratching at a spot on his black sombrero. He flipped at a fly buzzing around his brown-haired head. "You waste bullets like you do words, Kid? What're you trying to say?"

Mintoll's face began to puff again. He thought how he had two men to Ace's one in this town. How he was creepy sudden fast like a snake on the draw himself. Ace treated him like a child. He said, "Look. This thing tonight, when the specie comes

in. . ." That was going to be a real rich haul.

"If you pull it off," Ace stuck in, refilling the cups. "You was just telling how that Yucca City job blew up in your face, you know."

Mintoll slugged off his whisky. "Don't worry. You ain't in on this one. . . But it can't fail. I got one of the law boys working with me—under cover, of course."

"Tonight, huh. . . Hope there ain't going to be no shooting-up of the hotel. Got my new woman up there staying now." Jubal Ace was that big. He took his present woman around with him; they lived at the camp or in a nearby town. Sometimes there was more than one. "By the way, how much do you expect to take, Kid?"

Mintoll was pouring the whisky that time. "Bet I git almost ten thousand," he said. He knew he exaggerated a-plenty.

Ace nodded, staring at a spot on the table. "Uh-huh. I remember the night I dropped that much in a stud game at the *Palace of Chance* up in Dupree." He made it sound like losing two bits.

It was as if an invisible white-hot flame crackled in the air between them. Jube Ace liked to prod men to see how much they would take. Kid Mintoll was easily offended and it always rankled deeply. He could remember humiliations from his childhood. Now, twice, he had seen one of his men smirking behind his palm as Jube Ace whittled on him.

They had another drink. Ace had been pouring down liquor steadily for two days now. Mintoll had had a lot for him; he seldom took more than a few drinks at a sitting. His father had been a drunkard, died when he shot himself in the belly as he fumbled a draw and fell on his gun. The whisky crowded like a fever through Mintoll's veins now. He wanted to show this Ace.

"Yeah, that ain't such a heap," he agreed with Ace. "Not to a man like me, leastwise. Nothing to what I'll clean up soon."

"That so?" said Ace, pushing at a yawn. He was going to let this Mintoll run out his little bluff, then let him come to terms. A natural-born leader, he couldn't imagine sharing the reins with any man. But he knew the Kid was a slick one whom he could use in the outfit. "Yes?"

Little twin fever spots of fury dotted Kid Mintoll's chalky cheeks. Now he'd show him. He proceeded to tell about the girl he held as hostage, Miles Vergez' adopted daughter. And now her real father, believed lost in the fire at Tompkins Run years back, was actually alive and crazy rich from a gold strike.

"He'll pay a fat ransom for his long-lost daughter."

"Tompkins Run," mused Ace, cleaning a fingernail with a matchstick. "Uh-huh. . . What's the old man's name?" When the Kid said he didn't really know that, not yet, Jube Ace guffawed. "Kid, you sure talk a purty game. A purty. . . Ha-ha."

ONE of Mintoll's men came in. He said Vergez had just come. "All right, all right. I'll be out to see him in a minute." He wheeled his eyes back to Jube Ace. Laughed in a sneering way. "Yes? Well, this gent working with me, *he* knows her father. And here's a picture of him! The girl had it in a locket she wore." He pulled out the tiny photograph of Beth Vergez's real father.

Jube Ace stopped cleaning his fingernail and glanced idly at the yellowed picture. A gust of wind whistled around the old place and the door to the front room edged open. Ace blinked, then leaned closer.

"That's John Folsom, by thunder! Damned if it ain't!"

"You know him?"

"Sure. Lived in Tompkins Run myself when I was a younker. Remember him when he got married and settled down there. . . Had a little store, he did. . ." He shook his head at Mintoll. "He didn't hit it rich in a gold strike, Kid!"

"What? No?"

"Naw. He moved down to Texas after that fire that burnt out the run. Picked up a ranch, and they struck oil on it. He grabbed up all the land around quick afore anybody else got

wise. And he made a king's fortune in his old age. Gold? Shucks, that'd be two-bit stuff to him. Holy Mike, that oil, it keeps pumping in every day. And every day, old John Folsom gets richer. He—"

Jubal Ace could drink enough to drown an ox, but he always liked to boast. And it suddenly hit him, that in showing off his knowledge, he had boasted too much for once.

"Where is he now?" Mintoll asked.

"Europe, I think. He bought himself a castle over there. Spends half the year there. . . Last I heard, he hadn't come back yet. . ." That was true enough as far as Jubal Ace knew, too. He still held onto a corner of the yellowed photograph. Mintoll's fingers were vised to it, too. It was a tacit struggle.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was going to be no hold-up of the specie in Defiance Hill that night....

Both men were thinking fast, trying to plan, not looking at each other lest their faces betray the way their minds worked. "Your quirly, Jube!" Mintoll said quickly, pointing at where it had rolled from the dish that served as an ashtray. "Burning your sleeve...."

Ace fell into the trap, jerking up his arm to see. His fingers relaxed the grip on the photograph. Mintoll had it, was slipping it back into his pocket. Ace smiled, whistling softly. Both men stood up; Kid Mintoll put out his hand hypocritically.

"We must have another parley, Jube. You and me, we can get together why—well, we can do heap big things." Mintoll was pleased with himself. He held the aces. The photograph that would prove to the girl's father, John Folsom, that he had the girl. And, the big hole card, the girl herself. They stood clasping hands.

"Sure, sure," agreed Ace, trying to pinion Mintoll with his opague stare. But Mintoll refused to look, watching Ace's hands. "Why we—"

There was a commotion in the front room. Through the ajar door they heard a newcomer enter from the street. One of Mintoll's boys said, "What the hell, Harry? You looked scared. What—"

And through the doorway to the two leaders came the answer of Harry, the litle gnomelike one from Sad O'Neil's store. "Somepin awful's happened! Awful!" He paused to get his breath. "Somepin happened back at the hideout camp!" He told how he had been knocked unconscious in the horse shed. When he came to, he was scared, scared of being blamed for something. And he'd had a hunch about danger. So he'd grabbed a horse and high-tailed it for the camp. Never got there though.

"In the valley, I saw that Vergez' gal riding off," he panted on. "Gosh, where's the Kid? This is bad, I tell ya."

"You been hitting the jug, Harry," one of the men out front said.

"Honest, swear on a pack o' Bibles, I ain't had a drink since I left the store! I—I was too scared. There was the Vergez woman, like I was saying. Only she weren't coming to the crossroads. She went in the other direction. I didn't have my hogleg—forgot about it—or I'd uh done something. But I follyed her. She had a hogleg. I saw it."

"Where'd she go?" one of the others asked.

"Medicine Creek," said Harry. "I follyed her right in there. She went to the—"

"Shut up!" Kid Mintoll snapped from the inner room.

But it was too late. The name of the place, the little settlement, was out.

"Well, you'll be a-hearing from me, Kid," Jubal Ace said with a blank smile. His big hand tightened around Mintoll's fat one.

"Sure. Been real nice meeting up with you, Ace." With surprising strength, he met the challenge of the hand. His thick fingers bound Ace's knuckles. "Sure."

Ace redoubled his pressure, the grin never changing. Not showing a thing. He leaned forward a little over the shorter man. "Yep, Kid. We

can probably work out something." He had driven men to their knees with that grip of his, brought tears of agony to their eyes, broken a gent's hand once. "Reckon I might seem sorta high-handed—" He slammed more vicious power into the clamp of his fingers.

"Aw, don't think nothing of it, Ace," Kid Mintoll came back. The frame of his hand became like cast iron, unyielding, impervious to pain. And his stocky blunt thumb like a spade bit, gouging, biting into the back of Jubal Ace's hand. Bending bone, even. "Me, now, I fire up quick. But half the time I'm only funning. I know a real hombre when I see—" His breathing had stopped and his heavy chest was galvanized with the effort of pouring the power down that arm and into his hand.

"Sure. Yep." Ace's words came from stiff lips over clenched teeth. His shirt sleeve stirred over the great set cords in his long arm.

They stood thus, rooted and locked to each other's right hand, holding it the way a man might fasten on the neck of a close-striking snake. Perspiration made greasy alleys down Mintoll's plump white cheeks. Beads of sweat formed a pattern of liquid studs on Jubal Ace's forehead. The other three in the room were frozen, fearful of the silent struggle. It was awful watching the pair in the mockery, the false gesture of friendship. The other three only hoped nothing would happen.

"Well," said Mintoll. It was a grunt.

"Yes," said Ace, coughing the word. He tried to catch the Kid's eyes with him. The Kid stared at the second button of Ace's shirt.

BUT he could feel those famous eyes. Could feel his own sucked toward them like something drawn inevitably into a whirlpool. A fatal whirlpool. And he knew once he did look—

So he made the break. Till then, he had been holding *against* Ace's grip. Now he shot a spurt of power into his own fingers, flashed added sudden strength into the pressure, pushing against the taller man's hand, too, so that Ace was tilted backward for a moment. Mintoll's hand relaxed, became a soft slippery thing. It was like trying to hold a greased snake. He plucked it from Ace's grasp and streaked it desperately toward one of his white-stocked Colts with the silver star inlaid in the butt.

The die was cast, the fight was on. There would be no play for the incoming bank specie that night.

One of the Kid's gun-slicks in the room let out a yelp. Ace seemed to drift into the gunman's stance, body slaunchwise, as he went for both his holsters. It was like a couple of sidewinders tangling. A shot ripped; it was one of the Kid's boys.

It was the last shot he ever was to trigger off in his mortal career. Ace's seedy-looking backer had dropped into a corner. He fired twice. One drilled the Mintoll man dead center. The second shot shattered the lamp. As gouts of flaming oil flew, Kid Mintoll and Jubal Ace slammed their triggers. Both missed.

Not completely, but it was missing for them because they had shot to kill. Mintoll's slug just creased Ace's leg. Ace's bullet broke the skin on the right side of the Kid's forehead. Then they were in darkness that was rattling with the pent-up thunder of the gunshots and the men in the house screaming.

Ace and Mintoll were firing again, but it was blind, bluffing gunplay. Men throwing lead as they sought to determine their next move; both men resolutely determined not to die like rats in a hole.

The ajar door was pushed wider by a vagrant draft. Wan light from the lantern in the front room ran a gilt alley of light through. One of the Kid's men in the other room tried to rush in. A slug hit him in the belly and buckled him over. The second slug passed where his head had been and hit Vergez, waiting in the other room, in the neck. It slammed him against a wall where he hung like a frozen figure several moments. Then

the belly-hit man tumbled back, dragging the door closed with him.

The stabbing muzzle-flashes continued to make a lattice-work pattern, livid, brief-lived, in the room. The Kid's second gun-passer sank, leg broken. Afterward Ace's gunhand was found huddled up in the corner with a bullet in his brain—or what was left of it. Then all lead stopped flying.

In that instant, for the first time since they had sat down together in that room, Kid Mintoll and Jubal Ace were in accord. Neither knew it though. They both had decided to get the hell out alive. Shooting in there in the dark was too much like a blind gamble for either of them.

The Kid knew there was a trapdoor, over in a corner, to the cellar. Ace had noted a boarded-up window frame in the side wall before.

The table smashed through the boards across the window, battering them out into the alley. Crouched nearby, Ace waited. No slugs drilled through the new aperture. Kid Mintoll was already lowering himself into the cellar. Ace threw himself at the window and snaked over it as if the sill were red-hot. Both of them were almost frantic in their efforts to get outside. It wasn't fear that drove them. Both knew that the one who got outside first and organized his forces would be the man who left Defiance Hill on his boots instead of boots first.

OUTSIDE the window, Jubal Ace ran to the front of the narrow lane between the old house and the closed store beside it. There was no out there. The head of the alley was solidly boarded up well over a man's reach. He doubled on his tracks and rushed to the rear after pausing to slam fresh shells into his still smoking guns. It was that time interval that gave Kid Mintoll his chance. The Kid knew Ace had to be stopped or he would head for Medicine Creek and the girl.

Down in the cellar, Mintoll scratched a match once. His legs shook from the drop to the hard earth floor. But when he thought how much that girl was worth, now that he knew about her old man and his oil, he got new strength. He ran over to a stairs, went up them, and pushed open a door cautiously. "That you, Kid?" said one of his men.

They wheeled, both throwing up their Colts, as the front door of the house creaked open wide. Moonlight ran in like a silvery bodiless tide. Fresh blood glistened on the threshold. The badly-wounded Miles Vergez had just succeeded in dragging himself out into the tense night. Up the road he went, swaying on knees buckled with weakness, almost feeling his way as he held a bandanna to the hole in his neck.

"Where's the Kid?" called one of the Mintoll men from some grass in a lot.

"Back there," croaked Vergez. "Things is bad."

Back in the house, Vergez held his breath, listening. He had the acute hearing of an animal. "Let's go out and get the bunch," he said to his gunhand. "We gotta stop that Ace!"

There wasn't going to be any holdup of the specie that night because two outlaw leaders had fallen out. They were gambling at gun-point for a stake far greater than that specie.

CHAPTER XII

JUBAL ACE hadn't known how many of his bunch the sly Mintoll had around. He had just seen the man who met him on the trail at the edge of town and brought him in to the house. And the four in the house, two of whom had been in the inner room with them. Ace thought that was all of his bunch Kid Mintoll had in Defiance Hill.

Ace ducked around in back and went down past the store and came out toward the road, a big man hunched in the shadows. His cocked guns, held before him, weaved and jabbed like things with separate lives of their own as he advanced. The trio who'd come in with him, beside the little one who'd died in the room, he had left in the road. He

sighted them standing over by the lightning-riven tree out of the moonlight. Their horses were back in there somewhere. Ace whistled softly and they glided toward him. He wasn't worried about getting out of this. He always had gotten out of a tight all right.

"What blew up—Hell's lid, Jube?" asked one of the men.

Ace's jaw poked out. "That fat little cow-chip got the idea he was lucky for a moment! Git the hosses. We'll be leaving 'em our dust."

"Backing water to that Mintoll?" one of them said.

"Something bigger—a heap bigger—on the fire, Bob. Him, Mintoll, he can wait. . .the hosses. . ."

Bob went for them. He never came back. The Kid had had time to line up his men who'd been scattered about purposefully. That was necessary so nobody would suspect an outlaw bunch was skulking about the town. And there were more men than Dal Casson had seen at the store or at the hideout. Mintoll was a shrewd one. With those marshals making tracks all around the country like a lot of crazy chickens, the bunch in one pack would have been harder to hide.

Bob, Ace's man, hit back across the road for their ground-anchored ponies. From the creek came the slow gurgle of water around a boulder. A woman's shrill laughter came faintly from one of the honky tonks. Bob stumbled and the blackness seemed pinpointed with ugly red jabs. The guns of Kid Mintoll's bunch breaking into action. Bob stumbledonce and tried to run. He ran as if his boots had turned to lead. Swearing, Ace tried to answer the guns with his own lead.

THE muzzle flashes punching livid rents in the dark, some of them, turned on him. Slugs plunked into the wood front of the store close around Ace. He saw Bob rock backward into the moonlight, paw feebly at nothing. Then he went down flat and twisted slowly over on his face and settled into an endless sleep.

"There he is! There he is!" shrilled the high-pitched voice of Kid Mintoll out of the night off to the right.

Ace saw that gun muzzles were flickering at him from the left, too. He took his two men left with him and retreated back alongside the store. "Old Stokey'll be moving in soon."

Down the line, Kid Mintoll sucked his breath. This looked like it. Looked like he had the famed Jubal Ace practically hogtied and fixed for the slaughter. He would be one of the biggest men in the Southwest if he could knock off Ace. Mintoll began to give orders as he glided about.

The first gun-play inside the house had come to Dal Casson mufflledly. He couldn't be very certain just where it was, and he didn't know where Vergez had gone away. Loosening a gun in one holster, he eased over to some broken-down steps and waited. Outbreaks of gun-play were frequent in this end of the boomtown.

Somebody down the line began to holler. It grew quiet again briefly. Then there was fresh gunning.

They were outside now, he realized. Dozens of spitting hoglegs seemed to be pock-marking the night down there. Almost before he realized it he was advancing down the road, freeing his Colts. He saw Bob cross the patch of moonlight and get his light put out for all time. Then the gunfire broke off again. Casson crept down nearer the creek.

Hazy shapes that were men filtered through the night. "They're penned up in back there," a man called softly. "Cain't get back up into the main road either 'cause we got 'em cut off. Got 'em like fish in a barrel."

Casson stopped and asked himself what the devil he was doing. He didn't have to mess in this. If Vergez had got himself in a jam, it was his own fault. Vergez' girl was in the clear and he hadn't had to go in to see the Kid at all. He—

Something like the sharp cry of a night bird came from the creek. Before it faded, another bird called on the night, trilling off as if a-wing. But Casson detected the human note

in the clever imitations. Little Mex, who had broken out of prison with him, had been able to imitate birds like that.

"Here they come — over there! Over there!" And lead rained on the night again. Not ten yards from Casson a man came stumbling backward, holding one side of his head. He sat down, moaning softly, throwing his gun away as if he never wanted to see one of the things again.

A little cluster of gun flashes sparkled from the doorway of a broken-down abandoned hovel. Casson, waiting with thumbs on cocked hammers now, glimpsed Mintoll running through the night and waving to his gunhands. They had a line down across in front of the hovel, between it and the creek. Whoever was in that hovel, Casson figured, was living on borrowed time. Overdue to shake hands with the Devil. Then he saw Miles Vergez.

The man seemed to come out of the ground. Half his face was blood-smeared. Like a drunkard, he weaved along, stooped over so his hands at times almost touched the ground. He was a pitiful figure with the gunfire crackling around him.

"So you got a whupping, eh, Vergez," Casson crowed to himself. "Walked into some kind of a trap, huh, and got rawhided. . . Got what you deserved at last." He wanted to laugh but it wouldn't come, somehow. "Hell of a big tough lawman you look like now, Vergez! Yah. . . Crawlin' just like any other coyote when you git it and—"

It was then the creek itself seemed to erupt fire. Men wading it, unseen till their guns betold their presence, cut loose on the Mintoll bunch along the road from the back. The hombres, in the water up to their chests, seemed to have sprung out of the earth itself. They were the rest of the big Jubal Ace outfit, led by Stokey, his right-hand man. Some distance in the rear, they had tailed Ace when he rode in to meet Kid Mintoll's emissary earlier. They cut away at the line going for the house. Panic hit Mintoll's men.

BUT the Kid himself jumped into the middle of it, running toward the creek fearlessly. He realized the trap had been reversed. Some of the men in the water fell back. And two sank from sight, leaving a red tinge after them, as Mintoll ran up and down through the brush, triggering away. It was anybody's battle then, touch and go.

A stray slug nicked the half-blind reeling Vergez as he tried to drag himself up the road. Just skinned his shoulder. But he spun with the pain, made an about-face. And unaware he had turned, he started to prode on again, right back into the thick of it. Hardly able to believe, Casson took a few strides forward, peering. He saw a Mintoll gunman, running, taking a barrel slash at the wandering Vergez in the confusion. And then Dal Casson was running into it.

He wasn't quite sure why. All he knew was that he had sworn to that girl, Beth, that he would see to it her father was not killed by the Mintoll bunch; had sworn he would see Miles Vergez to safety. He went in in great leaping strides. His left-hand gun bled red through the moonlight as a gunman, turning, threw down at him. Another shot and he drove another to cover on a porch.

The Ace men breasting the creek were being driven back. Though the creek wasn't deep, the current was more powerful than they had known. It pulled them off balance, made their marksmanship haphazard. And Mintoll's nervy counter-attack had blunted the effect of their unexpected rush. Mintoll's men seemed to come out of everywhere in the night to drill lead at them. They might have copped the pot if it hadn't been for Dal Casson.

Flat gray hat jammed low on his hawkish face, he waded in. "Miles! Miles!" he bawled once when the fumbling, stumbling ex-lawman seemed to be looking his way. Lead horneted by Casson and he side-slid into shadow. Another Mintoll gun-

slick folded up before his accurate fire. He worked in closer on their flank, unaware how he was swinging the tide.

Three-four Mintoll men, taking him for another of the Ace bunch, formed a front against him. They were between him and Vergez who hung over a broken-down fence. The cold, hard core of temper inside Dal Casson swelled and fired up white-hot. For years he had lived with the hand of practically every man in the world against him. Now, for the first time, there was something more important in his life than vengeance. It was his promise to that black-haired tigress of a girl. These men, individuals of a breed he had come to hate, stood between him and fulfillment of that promise.

He swept at them, a long cat of a man with eyes that were smoking things in his head. His very audacity shot fear into them, put panic in their shooting hands. One slug cut a corner in his hat crown. Another actually gouged leather plus several cartridge loops from the side of his gun belt over one hip. Then he was on them. One man sinking with half his face blasted away. Another reeling down onto the mud flats of the creek. The third man legged it with a bullet in his shooting arm.

Leaping a prone body, Casson got to the side of the half-unconscious Vergez. The latter struck out weakly at him when Casson tried to steer him up the hill. Wrapping one arm around his waist, half lifting him, Dal Casson started up the road. A man fired at him from behind a tree in his rear. Turning with one reloaded Colt cocked, Casson calmly backed up the road with his burden. It was that instant that the waiting, watching Jubal Ace chose to make his break.

With two men at his back he lunged out across the road. Into a patch of brush on the creek bank. The fire of the Mintoll bunch was drawn that way. From the other bank, several men flung out into the stream with ponies. Ace himself dived into the water and struck out with strong strokes. Little geysers from lead-furrowed water hopped around him. Then he waded into the shallows across the way and swung into a stirrup.

Others of the bunch got back to that bank. It was just far enough across the creek in the night to make accurate gunmanship impossible. Stokey, the first lieutenant, swung over to Ace. Ace asked him something. Stokey nodded vehemently.

"Yep. They had their hosses," he meant the Mintoll outfit, "over here in a thicket. We run 'em off, Jube!"

Jubal Ace rose in the stirrups under the red willows at the other side of the creek. "Hey, Mintoll! I'll give the little lady your kindest regards. *Adios-s.* . ." And he swung up the bank, leading his pack off.

DAL CASSON got Vergez almost up to the main road. Men running down to see about the prolonged firing recognized the ex-state officer. They got a shutter and he was carried up to the hotel. A doctor hustled into Vergez' room on the second floor. He cleaned out and staunched the blood flow from the neck wound. The older man lay still as a corpse on the sheet.

"Think he'll live?" Casson asked dully.

"Don't know. Another half inch to the left and he'd uh had his backbone busted. The blood flowin' inside's been choking up his breathing and he ain't so young no more. He—"

"Go back down to your undertaker silent pardner and tell him you'll give him back his cut on this case," Miles Vergez growled as his sunken eyes opened. "The day a danged old pillroller can lay me away—then I'll know I'm not fitten to live no longer! Scat!" He climbed up on an elbow. "Awright, awright. Come back in half an hour. I—I got business to attend to now. Cass, git me a heap big slug from that whisky bottle!"

They were alone and a false glow wiped some of the terrible blanched look from his craggy face. But it was plain that Vergez was clinging to life by little more than an eyelash. That it was only his iron-willed determination, the bulldog quality that

had made him such a bane to outlaws in his heyday, that kept him conscious.

"Cass," he croaked to Dal Casson. "Come—come closer. It—it hurts my neck so to—to talk. . . Cass, Jubal Ace was there. . . He knows my —my Beth's in Medicine Creek. He . . .he's gone to get her, Cass!"

CHAPTER XIII

"I DID IT. . . I did it. I didn't mean to—but I put that girl in this. . ." It was an endless refrain that drummed through Dal Casson's mind. His dark hard mask of face twitched and worked. As he stalked up and down the hotel hallway outside Miles Vergez' room, he struggled with himself and the accusation of his conscience. It had surprised him to find he had one of the latter left. For years, he thought he had killed, throttled, all such things in him.

The little doctor came to the door and beckoned him. Vergez had something more to tell him. The ex-lawman had collapsed before he had finished his tale before. Casson went back in and Vergez, looking twenty years more aged, waved to him feebly with a very pale hand. He had lost a heap of blood. He said something about a smoke but the sawbones shook his head. They gave him another drink and Casson sat down. It was hard to sit, he felt so nervous.

"Now you gotta take it easy. Don't try to talk much, Vergez, and—"

"You danged old pill-roller, drag your carcass outa here. Go down and charge some drinks at the bar on me and maybe you'll forget the mistakes you got hidden up on Boothill. Me, I ain't a-going to be one of 'em." But Vergez' face fell when he was alone with Casson.

He told him the rest of it. How Jubal Ace had been in there with Mintoll. And then Harry had come in and blurted his tale of seeing the girl go up the valley to Medicine creek. "That was what the fight was about." Vergez' head fell back on the pillow, forehead dewy. There was no question of him getting up and going. It would be weeks, possibly months, before he would be up and around again, the doctor had said. That was, if he clung to the thin little thread of life that pulsed in him now.

"You sent the girl to her doom. . . You sent the girl. . ." the accusing voice in Dal Casson kept reiterating. It went on and on like a tireless echo.

The thing that had happened was inconceivable. Like some twist of a fickle pixieish Fate. Vergez had told him what Jubal Ace had said about John Folsom, Beth's real father, being fat-rich from oil down in Texas. How his incredible wealth heaped up day after day. Casson's big hands knotted as he thought of it.

IT WAS incredible that that windy he had made up—that cockeyed tale of the imaginary father hitting a gold strike—to bait Kid Mintoll had practically come true. The thing had been innocuous enough, designed to get him to Beth so he could snake her free. Yet now it had boomeranged in truth. Truth that spelled disaster for her. And—and if he hadn't given Kid Mintoll that lie, the Kid in his boasting wouldn't have shown Ace the photograph of the father whom Ace had known.

There it was in a nut-shell. And no escape from it. "You doomed her . . . you doomed her," the insistent little voice inside him took up again. Rising, he began to pace.

"Ace ain't got much patience with a woman—not a beautiful one," Vergez murmured from the pillow.

Casson's boots rooted to the carpet with the faded roses pattern. Without seeing it, he watched an enfeebled fly struggling in a spider's web in a corner of the window pane. It was like Beth would be.

There was suddenly stains of fresh blood on the heavy window frame. Only vaguely was he aware of the rattling of the glass. Then he saw one of his big-boned hands piston out and strike the frame again. As if in a dream he became aware of the skinned knuckles of his hand, the

slow-welling crimson running from them. Then he knew what he had been doing.

Then he knew he was in love—savagely, to the very core of him—with Beth Vergez. . .

Miles Vergez' eyes seemed to lift out of his head toward Casson in their gratitude when Casson said it. The slow flat-spoken words hung in the room. "I'll try to get to Medicine Creek in time," he'd said.

A little later he was down at the feed barn and having Vergez' own pinto horse saddled up for him. There was a short-cut across the ridge and down through the sand-hill country to Medicine Creek. Considerably shorter than going out to the crossroads and then heading into the slow-curving valley up which Beth Vergez had gone. Miles Vergez had made Casson a rude map of the route. Quirly perched in his taut mouth, he studied it as the livery barn man drew the cinch-strap on the pinto. A few minutes later he was riding out of Defiance Hill as lowering clouds marshalled across the face of the moon.

It all seemed a little crazy as he thought of it dropping down the other side of the razor-backed ridge. He had come to Defiance, stumbled on the man he had lived to hate. Casson's hand twisted at the saddle horn. Should have triggered and killed Vergez then and there, he knew. Then dragged his tail out of there pronto and down across the Border into Mexland.

But, instead, something had withheld his gun hand. And then he had gone out to free Beth Vergez to wreak a kind of twisted vengeance on Vergez himself. And now—he was in this. It was unbelievable. He half hated himself, calling it weakness. His dark hook-nosed face drew taut, lips thinning to seams. It didn't make sense. Yet. . .yet if he hadn't told that wild tale to Mintoll, neither he nor Jubal Ace would have tripped on the fact that she was the daughter of a fabulously wealthy oil king.

So here he was, a wanted man, an ex-jail bird, riding to the rescue of the daughter of a man he hated to the core. Locoed!. . . Only he loved Beth Vergez.

The dawn came. He never realized he'd had no sleep. His mind was focussed on beating Jubal Ace there. The sky faded to a lustreless whitish dark, then grew streaked in the east. He took out some jerked beef and chewed on it, then impatiently spat out the final scrap and fired up a quirly. Rounding an elbow of low hill, he came suddenly on Medicine Creek from the east, a little settlement scattered along one yellow bank of a creek that had dwindled from a river. It seemed serenely still. The sun had been up about an hour.

A SPARE, slouched, yet somehow alert figure in the kak, he rode in. One unholstered gun hung in a hand. The trail from the south, over which Jubal Ace would come, dropped out of sight over a sharp crest. A yellow-spotted dog barked at him and a bleary-eyed swamper peered from a saloon doorway. He ran up the steps of Mrs. Sebring's boarding house hurriedly. It lay at the end of the single short side street. He hammered three sets of times before the irate Sebring woman, a large red-faced widow, finally stuck out her head. She started to sputter.

Casson jerked off his hat. He was mad at himself again. What a damnfool he was! If Ace hit the place, the odds would be heavy against him getting out with his hide whole. "Tell Miss Vergez that Casson's here and to hurry. They's trouble a-building, ma'm!"

"Don't you ever say 'please', young man? And what kind of a time in the morning is this to be awakening a nice young miss—" the Sebring woman started to lay him out.

"It's not too early for trouble," Casson snapped, eyes intent. "I want to get Miss Vergez to safety. Some men are drifting this way who don't mean her any good. I'm *asking*. Maybe you'd like to see some men kick down your door and walk in at gun-point, ma'm."

She saw that thing in his eyes and recoiled slightly. Then she nodded and the door slammed in his face. With his ear against it he heard her hustle up the stairs calling Beth. After that, time seemed to alternately creep and leap. Every instant was precious. It seemed impossible it could take a female critter that long to climb into her clothes, knowing there was danger. A few people had come out into the road. Across it a butcher was unlocking his log-pole store.

The impatience bursting in him, he beat at the door again. When Mrs. Sebring opened it, he leaped by her and started up the stairs. "She's in the dining room, having a bite to warm her stomach. . . She can't leave anyways till my boy gets her pony saddled!"

He had forgotten about that. He ran through some beaded drapes and through a sitting room into the boarding house dining room. Her hair seemed blue-black now as she lifted a cup of coffee. Then the tawny eyes met his staring ones calmly across the rim of the cup.

"Good morning, Mr. Casson," she said with what he knew was mock humility. "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

He trembled as he stood over her. She buttered some bread and switched her eyes up from a pale face unexpectedly. A feeling like the jab of hot knives ran through his body. His voice went cracked and husky deep in his throat. "Hurry, please. Jubal Ace is headed this way. And he knows—" It suddenly came to him that if this girl knew she was the heiress to millions in an oil fortune she would never have eyes for a common critter like him again.

"Jubal Ace?. . . It seems to me I've heard the name. Yes. How nice." With maddening slowness she proceeded to add more milk to her coffee.

"Look, Beth—I mean, Miss Vergez. Ace is an outlaw and a damn—begging your pardon—bad one. You've got to get out of—"

Her look raked him from his bared head to spurs. "An outlaw? And what would you call yourself, Dal Casson?"

He writhed. "Listen. Ace is coming for you. He—"

"Come a long ways, I hope. It's very flattering to a young lady indeed." She trilled out a laugh but her lips were white.

His fear for her safety had himself half crazed. Seizing her arm, he yanked her halfway out of the chair, swung his other arm around her waist. "Ma'm—" Then he saw Mom Sebring glaring from the kitchen doorway.

"Before I do anything—yes, I'll keep my promise—but *I* have a few things to say. Where's my father, Miles?"

"He's—he's safe. . . Away from the Mintoll outfit. They've been shot up bad." He told her quickly about Miles' wound but tried to reassure her.

HER eyes plumbed his face. "You could kill him easily in his present condition, couldn't you?"

When she said it, he realized for the first time that the thought had never entered his mind as his arch-enemy lay helpless in the hotel bed. "Your—your father's alive. I gave you my word. I dragged him out of a shooting mess."

"All right." She moved around him and began to arrange her cloud of dark hair in a wall mirror. "I gave you mine. . .a Vergez never breaks it." Then she started for the stairs, saying she had to get something from her room.

Casson grabbed her again roughly. "Look, this Jubal Ace is due here any moment. You know why Kid Mintoll held you as a hostage? Well—uh—Ace has plans some like that, too."

She sensed he was evading the exact truth. Her lips curved in an ironic smile. "You're afraid of Jubal Ace, aren't you?"

He wanted to shake her till her teeth rattled. He looked around for Mom Sebring. She seemed to have disappeared. "Look. I didn't have to come here, you silly-headed fool! I stuck my neck in a trap to—"

"To collect your end of the bargain," she snapped back at him. "To—" When he reached to grab her up and get away by force, she struck him sharply across the mouth. "All right. I'll keep that bargain, Mr. Dal Casson. But you can save your boogery scary stories of the big bad outlaw please."

From the tail of his eye, through the window curtain, he saw a man running frantically down the side street. A shot smashed the peaceful air of the settlement into a thousand splinters. He took a stride closer to the window. Up by the crossing a lot of townsfolk were herded together, hands lifted. Around them milled Ace riders. Jubal Ace himself in a jauntily cocked gray sombrero wheeled into sight a moment. They were lining up the town.

"Ace. . ." Casson's tongue flicked his abruptly hot-dry lips and he slapped a hand for a Colt butt.

"Casson—" Beth cried breathlessly from halfway up the stairs. He came around fast, kicking a chair in the dimness of the curtained room. . . An Ace gunhand stood at the rear of the short hallway; he had come in by the back door.

He fired as Casson, just clearing his muzzle from the thonged-down holster, sighted him. Casson's head jerked back, face upward, as if he sought out a spot on the ceiling. He swayed backward as his Colt fell from nerveless fingers. He heard the gunman say, like something heard in a dream:

"Come along, ma'm. Your beau's going to have one hell of a slick headache. . ."

Thunder reverberated inside Casson's skull. He vaguely sensed the warm blood pouring down one jaw. Then he clutched at a curtain, tore it half from the rod. Part of it fell over him like a white shroud when he hit the floor. . .

CHAPTER XIV

THEY had taken Beth Vergez and swept out of town. That was what Casson learned as he stood in the hot midday sun of the main road and dumped down the glass of whisky somebody had put in his hand. Snatched her and got the hell out of there, the whole big bunch of them. "Jubal Ace himself took off his hat and gave her a big bow," somebody volunteered.

Casson squeezed up his eyes against the glare. His head felt as if there were a bunch of loose fence posts inside it. They rattled and banged and bounced together at the slightest move on his part. Only dimly did he recall coming to in the boarding house sitting room. He'd stared at a red hand under his face and wondered whose it was. Then he saw, as feeling came back into his carcass, that it was his own. And that the red on it was blood, his blood. It hadn't seemed possible that he was still alive.

He'd staggered out to the pump. Some men came along. They found Mom Sebring locked up down in her well-house. The town barber cut some hair away from Casson's scalp wound over his left ear. Bandaged it up neatly. Casson had just been creased, knocking him unconscious. Another fraction of an inch and he would have had a six-by-three claim out on Boothill.

The settlement still panted with fear. Casson tried to get things straight in his buzzing mind. He asked a man how Ace's bunch had known Beth Vergez. It had been simple. Ace had ordered one of his men to put a gun against the head of a six-year-old girl. Then he had called upon "Miss Vergez" to step forward. There had been a tense moment. And with a little scream, the mother of the girl had fallen in a faint. Beth Vergez had stepped out of the line drawn up in the gutter on the main road.

"And then they busted the breeze outa here."

"Which way?" Casson asked mechanically. He knew how little chance he had.

The man pointed to the east. But another spoke up. He had come riding down from the hills in the east inside of the last hour, had seen nei-

ther hide nor hair of the Jubal Ace bunch. Or any other bunch of riders.

It was hopeless. He knew that. It gave him a cold vacant feeling as if the bottom had dropped out of life. And he'd mistakenly thought he'd known that feeling before. He asked a boy to take his pinto horse down to the feed barn to be grained and groomed. Then he walked into the settlement's sole barroom and bought some drinks. The buzzing in his head began to fade. Then something there snapped and he saw the only thing left for him to do.

There wasn't a prayer of tracking down an experienced owlhoot bunch like Ace's. Even if he had done so, there would be little he could do. One against that pack. . .and they always had the hostage, Beth, to tie his hands.

A man came up and held out Casson's gray frock coat. One shoulder was blood-stained. Casson shook his head and caught at the train of his thought. One thing left. A little while later he rode out of Medicine Creek and down the valley toward Sad O'Neil's General Store. There he could get in contact with Kid Mintoll again. Without a doubt, the Kid would be planning to clip Jubal Ace's horns somehow.

It was evening when he walked into the General Store of Sad O'Neil's. He'd left his pony ground-anchored in a thicket to the south and slipped up furtively almost to the front steps. He didn't want to have a bullet let daylight through him as he rode up. Quickly he went up the steps and under the big gilded horseshoe. Over in the west the sun was a red ball couched on the horizon.

O'Neil lifted his sullen, red-eyed face from a ledger he studied on the counter. For the space of three seconds he just stared like a man faced with a walking corpse. Then he made a wordless cry and grabbed a pistol off a shelf behind a flour sack.

Casson lounged forward on his thin legs, thumbs tucked easily in the front of his shell belt. "I meant to be back s o o n e r," he drawled. "Where's the boss?"

O'Neil made a choking sound. He said something about a dirty low-down skulking rat. He jerked up the gun. Sheer unbelief froze his finger on the trigger. He said, "Are you locoed?"

CASSON shrugged. He was playing it out on cold unholy nerve. "'Course not, chunkhead. But you'll be crazy as a bat time the Kid gets finished combing your ears with a six-gun barrel—if you don't put that smoke-wagon away. What in blazes makes you think I'm locoed?"

O'Neil was still dumfounded. "I heard of gents committing suicide. But danged my eyes if I ever seen a gent do it before."

Pulling off his sombrero gingerly over his head patch, Casson beat the dust from it on the counter as if his appearance were the most natural thing in the world. "You talk like a chuck-wagon cookee with a vanilla extract jag on, O'Neil. Honest, you—"

"What happened to your head?"

"Stopped some Jubal Ace lead over Medicine Creek when I tried to stop 'em taking the girl."

"By the sweating shade of St. Peter," O'Neil said over again several times. Under the dingy store lantern great beads of sweat decorated his hairless skull. "By the—say, do you know the Kid'll burn you down on sight, that he'll—say, you must be locoed!"

Casson lounged against the counter, building a quirly. It took nerve, incredible nerve, not to keep a hand hovering nigh to a Colt. It scared him, not the chance he took so much as the cold defiance of the laws of probability. "O'Neil, the Kid's taking an awful chance letting you have responsibility. Sometimes I don't think you know what time it is!"

O'Neil's head twisted instinctively to the clock on the shelf. Then he jerked back. "Say—" But his levelled gun began to dip.

"And as far as the Kid burning me down—no. He's smart. Also, when I go to a holster, I got an even chance with any man living. Ask me sometime and I'll give you a demonstra-

tion. Only, if you got any last letters to write, write 'em *first.*" He shied at a deer fly. "Got a match?"

Inside of half an hour, Kid Mintoll himself came in. By the tunnel from the horseshed after two of his men had drifted into the store to see that the coast was clear. Casson and the Kid met in the middle of the room, the Kid's gun bared and two other guns covered Casson's back. With Casson was the gangling Hank who'd been out at the camp when Casson pulled out the girl. He moved with the aid of a homemade cane on his injured leg, goggling at Casson all the while.

"You got a lot of explaining to do, Casson," Kid Mintoll said softly. The soft way a cat would purr it to a cornered rat.

Dal Casson smiled and spat into a corner. "What in hell do you think I came back for?"

"Let's have the alibi," the Kid said.

"Alibi?" Casson looked around as if bewildered. "Say, Kid, the word's up and down the trail that Jubal Ace gave you a whupping and's going to run you outa the country. But nobody said you'd got teched in the head yet, by grab!"

Mintoll swore very softly, dripping the oaths. "Jubal Ace—well, I ain't played my last card yet. Him and me—"

Casson glared, simulating anger. "Talking of last cards, he's got our hole card—that girl! And I don't see how in blazes he knew where she was less'n you leaked off at the mouth."

Mintoll looked as if he would spit. He swelled like a snake priming to strike. His piggish body seemed to twist inside his fancy clothes. "How the hell could I tell him? How the hell was I to know where—" He was losing his temper.

The cold-nerved Casson smiled inwardly. It was what he wanted. "How would you know? For cripe's sake, didn't I send a message down here to the store with a ranny I met? Give him five dollars to deliver it, too. Told him to tell O'Neil here that the lady had gone to Medicine Creek. I figured even an old flathead like O'Neil could savvy that!"

O'Neill mumbled defensively, "I never got no message."

"Why couldn't you deliver it yourself?" the Kid looked baffled and unsure.

"What? And lead them danged marshals smack dab in here? Jumping Jehosophat, Mintoll, give me credit for some brains! Why—"

"What marshals, Casson?"

"The ones snooping around the hideout camp, of course. What the hell do you think I dragged the skirt outa there for—exercise?"

"MARSHALS at the camp?" The Kid leaned on the table, gun flat on it, loose in his grasp. "What marshals?"

"The ones I saw buzzing around out back here while that fat-head O'Neil was swapping chin music with another one of 'em in the store over a jug of redeye!" He told it that he'd seen them working around to the back. Told it that he'd seen them bat Harry over the skull so they could move up the side-trail unreported. "So I slipped out the back and got a pony and followed them in. What the hell was I supposed to do—squat here and whistle till you showed?" He said they missed the hidden inlet to the hideout and passed it. Told how he'd waited no longer but gone in to get Beth Vergez out before they back-tracked and found it. "That little hellcat! Tried to put lead in me, by grab!"

"You set her free," Mintoll said.

Casson sneered. "Free? How in tarnation could she be free with you practically holding a hogleg in her old man's back? Didn't you tell me that yourself?"

The Kid blinked and was nodding slightly before he knew it. But Hank, wounded by Casson up at the camp, put in his two-bits worth then.

"You got oil in your tongue clapper all right, Casson! By grab, yes. . . But you ain't fooling me. You come in there and said the boss said to clear out. You—"

"You smoked it out with them boys," the Kid said.

"Of course, on both counts." To Hank, "I had to tell you rannies

something, you were so damn boogery. Would you have believed me if I said anything else? Or do you think there was time to sit down and hold a debating society meeting?" He swung his head on the Kid, snapping a sack of makings from a shirt pocket with careless irritation. "Sure I swapped some lead with those chunkheads in the camp, Kid! They sprung guns on me and I was damned if I was going to hang around here till them marshals come in and hog-tied me! And they'd uh grabbed off the girl, too. Or don't you give a dang about what she's worth anymore?"

The kid rubbed his upper lip indecisively. "You say you sent the girl to Medicine. Then sent through a message. Then—where was you?"

Casson looked over his shoulder at the Colts covering his back. "Tell your tin soldiers, Kid, I'm getting a bellyful of 'em holding their hardware on me. Makes me think I'm back in the Big House again. . . I was a-dragging my tail off through the hills with some of them marshals trying to pin my coat-tails down with a bullet. Then I hit for Medicine Creek. And Ace's gang walked in." He tapped his bandaged head wound. "Or did you think I cut myself shaving, Kid?"

It was quiet for the space of a full minute. Mintoll walked around with little short steps. He fussed with the patch of bandage over the gash on his forehead. His oilly eyes kept sliding over to Casson.

O'Neil finally perforated the uneasy stillness with his sad voice.

"Well, he did walk smack in here big as life. . . I couldn't believe it was him a-coming back. I couldn't believe it. Weren't sensible. But now. . ." He meant he did believe now. After all, Casson *had* returned. Voluntarily.

Casson had another brain-pill going. He funnelled smoke from his hook of a nose impatiently. Hit the table a crack. "Let's put the cards down, Kid. I don't like this none atall! None, by grab! I risk getting my hide nailed to the fence to keep hold of that girl and—" He swore harshly. "And it begins to smell like certain parties might be suspecting me now! By grab, I just miss getting a hole in my head which I need like you need barbed-wire lining for your underdrawers and, by grab—"

The Kid spoke with a cold stub of cigaret wiggling on his fat lower lip. "Casson, maybe you're smart as all git-out. Maybe I been thinking wrong about you. But you told me Beth Vergez' old man—her real father—that he'd cleaned up on a gold strike. Maybe you don't know—"

CASSON lounged back, quickly recalling what Miles Vergez had told him. "All right, so it really was oil. Maybe-so I didn't trust you too much then. If I'd said oil—well, maybe you could figure where he was. The big oil fields—the gushers—we all know where the famous ones are."

"What's his name—her real father's name?" the Kid flung as quickly as a man would flick a whip.

"Go—to—hell," Casson said softly. He picked up a scrap of brown paper covered with figures and a pencil stub from the table. Turned over the paper and printed the initials "J. F." For John Folsom, as Vergez had informed him was the name of Beth's real father. Negligently he flipped the paper in Mintoll's direction.

The Kid pinned it down with a fat thumb and squinted. Began to smile. Began to chuckle softly. "Casson, first moment I clapped eyes on you I said to myself, 'This slick-eared coyote is slicker 'n slobbers.' Maybe that's what made me a little sceered of trusting you all the way. . . But now I know." He signed O'Neil to bring a jug of redeye.

"Casson," Kid Mintoll said, shining his diamond ring on his shirt sleeve with satisfaction, "you and me together—we can hang the deadwood on that Jubal Ace!"

Which was what Casson had been playing for. To use one outlaw band to break Ace's band and get Beth Vergez free of his hands. . .

CHAPTER XV

THEY rode out through the night to Kid Mintoll's new camp. The Kid didn't seem gravely worried over the fact that Jubal Ace held possession of Beth Vergez.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, Casson," the Kid said. "That Ace, he isn't going to do much pronto about the girl."

"Why?"

"I picked up word. Even though he's Ace—and even if he had a coupla hundred crack gun-passers backing him—he wouldn't dare stick his nose over the Texas line. He'd have the hull state on his neck and he knows it. Why?" He leaned from the saddle and the words slipped oilily from his lips.

A little while later, Casson asked, "You aiming to sit around and wait while he gets word through somehow to her real father?"

Mintoll made a thin little laughing sound. "Listen, Ace has to play my game. He's dead broke—I knew that afore I met him—and his outfit is spoiling for trouble." Ace, according to the story, had had a pile of loot cached up in the Yellow Horse hills somewhere. Stuff that belonged to the bunch, as their share, as well as him. The word was that in a drunken revel, he had told about it to one of his women of the moment. The woman disappeared from his life. When the band next stopped off in the Yellow Horse hills, the stuff was gone.

"So Ace has to git operating," Mintoll said. "And he's going to be operating in my country. Here, in the Defiance Strip! *Sabe?* My piece of country, where I got friends and allies. Bet gold to dobie dollars I'll know about his moves before he makes 'em. And when I do—" He looked back at the column to ask dour Hank where that spring was on his trail.

The new camp was out in the barren lands beyond the Defiance range. They rode across a flat country of browned buffalo grass, then onto a spit of desert. Windy. Trackless. The sand grew scarcer with more lava outcroppings. Great gashes of sunken canyons plowed the terrain. They turned into one. A couple of miles down its tortuous course, in a bowl, was the camp. As the men gathered from around campfires here and there, Casson estimated Kid Mintoll had about forty-odd hands in his regular bunch.

There were some rude cabins tucked under an overhanging wall of stone. The Kid told one of the men to bunk Casson in a cabin. Casson found himself striding along under the pallid moon with Hank at his side. Casson walked slower to keep back with Hank. The fingers of the latter's gun hand kept twitching slightly. Hank slowed still more. Casson shortened his stride till they were moving like mincing sleepwalkers. Shoulder to shoulder, eyes twisted into the corners to watch each other, they came to the door. Hank pushed it open. Casson waited for him to go in ahead, sensing that the instant he left his back exposed to this dour-faced man might be his next to last on this earth.

"Go on in," said Hank.

"You better show me the way. My eyes are plumb worthless at night. Cain't see a match once it gits beyond arm's length."

Hank's mouth sneered beneath his long nose. "Smooth-lyin' son of a skonk. . . You spit-licking coyote, you ain't fooling me none. You and me got something to settle some day, a right bad bone to pick."

Mirth flickered on Casson's dark sharp-profiled face. "As you call 'em, Hank. Only give me the bigger end of the bone, will you?"

THE Kid was correct in his surmise. He had friends in the Defiance Strip all right. They spent two days out in the barren lands camp. Sweating inside and doing a heap of stall walking, Dal Casson wondered what was happening to Beth. Then word came to Mintoll. Came through a one-time owlhooter who had settled down to a respectable career of occasional horse-stealing.

Jubal Ace was going to hit Carroll Flats, to hit the big Two Brothers Bar in the Flats beside the stage division station where the coaches changed teams. The next night.

Mintoll fingered the gold ring, binding a green neckerchief, this time, at his throat. "Pretty small pickings for Ace. . . But it looks as if he's desperate as all-git-out, that's all. All right. We'll be there with a little surprise for him. We might even capture Ace himself!"

Carroll Flats was down on the Red Snake River, thirty miles southwest of Defiance Hill. Unhurriedly they left the camp the next forenoon to get there. The Kid's campaign plan was plain enough to Dal Casson. He intended to hack and whittle away at the famed Ace, decimating his outfit till he could risk a pitched battle to corner him. Casson himself had gotten a haggard look and his eyes jerked fretfully as will the eyes of a worried person.

Kid Mintoll passed him a bottle. "Take a double slug, Cass. You look ailing to me. Sorta remind me of a pardner I had once who was always getting love-sick."

"Love-sick? Me?"

"That Beth Vergez is a pretty piece, ain't she?"

Casson nodded as he gave to the movement of the horse under him. "Sure is. And they got pretty ones in any first-class honky tonk on a main trail. They's a blond huzzy up at Gordon's Eldorado in Big Pine. And I'll never forget the lips of a little Mex spitfire over at Memphis Mary's in Gunstock Canyon. . . Yep, heap of pretty ones."

"Sure. Sure. Only sometimes an hombre gits bit bad for one skirt. Then. . ."

"You gab away like a mid-wife, Kid. Did I ever tell you it was Miles Vergez, her adopted father, who framed me into the Big House?"

"Oh," said the Kid. "Say, you know I never met more'n two rannies who didn't claim they was 'framed' into prison." He laughed, and slapped his thigh. Half mile further down the trail he laughed again —at the same thing. Kid Mintoll likes his jokes. When they slipped up behind the hill in the twilight that frowned down on the Flats, the Kid chuckled some more and repeated the joke.

They left their ponies and worked up over the crest of the hill in the high grass. A couple of the men drifted down into the town to check. Mintoll was sanguine. "Ace almost always leads a raid. Boasts that he won't never send a man where he won't go himself. So we got a sure-fire chance to grab him off in person. Hmmm."

A black cloud in the west swallowed the last of the sun. Cicadas chirped away in the grass. The two men came up the hill. Ace's bunch wasn't around yet. The darkness closed in, erasing the little steeple of the white-washed meeting house on the north at the edge of the Flats. Mintoll had his men creep in nearer. They worked down so they were right behind fences back of the single road. A couple more hours passed.

Two more men went down to the Two Brothers Bar to check on the layout. They hustled back and reported that Stokey, Ace's right-hand man, was in there drinking. From the gully off to the west came the echoes of the approaching stage. Then there was a cluster of gunshots from down in the barroom.

This was it. "That slick snake must have had his men planted around here all the time," the Kid yelled. "Git in, boys!" They figured to catch the Ace bunch between themselves and the river.

They streamed into the road, guns bared. Hank came down the street from the east end of the street with three men. The Kid himself led the west end of the closing trap. It closed and closed down to the Two Brothers place. And, the gunfire now stopped, there was no sign of a raider bunch. Casson found one thing peculiar. There was no evidence of the bunch of ponies a holdup band would have.

THE town didn't have a natural feel either. The road was empty.

There was a certain baited-breath sensation in the atmosphere. Casson found his long legs slowing as he dropped back. Three shots and a scream issued from the lighted-up barroom with its shuttered front windows.

When some of the Kid's men rushed up the wide steps and slammed wide the bat-wings, Dal Casson was blended with a tree trunk across the road. He had vaguely dreamed of making a bid to grab off Jubal Ace himself and snaking him away alone. To do that would require being in the van of the attack. But some old trail savvy held him back. He watched some more men plunge into the Two Brothers.

Then it was as if somebody had unplugged a barrel of burning dynamite. As if Hell's own back door had been blasted from its hinges.

The first three men inside the barroom came slapping out against the swinging doors backward, filled with lead. Shutters flew open and guns sprouted from them. At one end of the street, men boiled from doorways. U. S. marshals' badges flashed on the shirts of some. The night seemed to vomit lead. It was as if the whole roof of the sky had fallen in on them.

Somebody screamed, "We're stabbed in the back!"

Dal Casson faded back into an alley. A law officer from the dark doorway of the adjoining store threw down on him. A snap shot of Casson's shattered the glass in the door around the man and Casson was gone. He got to the river and ran down along the banks till he was beyond the bullet-wracked town. Then he swung in an arc and got over behind the hill where the ponies were left. Three men, one of them the Kid, came tearing up. They had grabbed ponies by breaking into the stageline barn at the division plant station. Mintoll had a flesh wound in his left arm.

He ordered them back to the crest of the hill to throw down a covering fire for the men trying to retreat. Some men straggled up through the high concealing grass as the first drops of rain spattered down on the night. A handful of them rode off as they sighted marshals working around to the side of the hill. It was a terrible defeat. The rain, wiping out hoofprints, was the only saving thing.

They got back to the barren land hideout and the Kid took Casson into his own cabin with him. Put a jug of redeye on the table and thumped down into a chair. Casson poured drinks. The Kid took a sip of his and started to slowly and viciously curse Jubal Ace. He went on for minutes at a time, wiped his mouth, and launched a fresh train of epithets.

What had happened was plain. It had been the crafty Ace who'd laid the trap, who'd deliberately planted the information he was going to make the raid, foreseeing Mintoll's move. Then the word had been passed, indirectly, by Ace to the marshals that the Mintoll bunch planned to hold up the Two Brothers Bar. Simple.

It brought a dry sob from Dal Casson. What happened to Kid Mintoll and his bunch was all important to Casson. It was only by using them he could hope to smash Jubal Ace.

They sat on through the waning night. Riders began to straggle in. Mintoll would step to the doorway, calling their names, counting them aloud. One, alone. Two men, one so badly shot up he'd be useless for weeks. Finally a trio. But the one in the middle was lashed to his saddle, dead.

It was still raining when dawn came. An hour later the last man returned, a bullet-broken arm dangling limply. Mintoll came back inside, ignoring the rain-drops pimpling his face. He dropped into a chair, counting off on his fingers.

"Twelve lost—dead or captured," he said at last. Suddenly he reached forward and struck as quickly as a cat. He knocked his tin cup, with only that first sip of whisky taken from it, off the table. It hit the side wall and the whisky dripped down the logs, splashing over a saddle bag.

The Kid stared at it. Some white cloth shone from the open top.

He pulled it out slowly and spread it carefully on the table. He was like a man in a trance, automatically going through the simple routine of some chore. The white thing was a silk muffler. From it came the faint perfume of a woman. Then the eyes in Casson's dark face blinked and he leaned closer. In one corner was embroidered the initials "E. V." Gradually it dawned on him that the scarf belonged to Beth Vergez.

The Kid sat rubbing his fat fingers along it, brooding. Then his fleshy lips began to suck inward. A calculating light grew in his eyes. A minute before he had started to hurl the thing to the floor. Now he nodded and folded it carefully and, equally carefully, tucked it inside his silk shirt. He handled it like a prized valuable possession that he planned to use.

CHAPTER XVI

LIKE a wounded animal, the bunch lay up in the hideout licking their wounds. Nobody had much to say. One morning two men were missing, their horses gone as well. That night, the Kid himself put a bullet through the head of another man trying to slip from the canyon, deserting.

Some men who lived in the Defiance Strip dropped in singly on the third and fourth day. They were men Mintoll had on his pay roll to supply him with information. They had little of any value. Nobody knew where Jubal Ace was holed up.

Writhing inside with impatience, bucking against the inactivity, Casson decided to drift into Defiance Hill. At least in the big boomtown there was a bare chance of picking up some clue. Sometimes when he thought of the tawny-eyed slip of a girl a prisoner in the power of Ace, a man who took his women where and when he wanted them, Casson went out of his head.

"Might be a good idea," the Kid agreed. "You ain't known as one of the outfit anyway. You and me gotta get that girl back, Cass. She means a heap of dinero to us. I'll send Hank and Hammer Blue along with you. . ."

Defiance Hill seemed to be booming more than ever as the trio sloped into it at dusk. The streets were jammed, a solid line of ponies and carts at every hitch-rack. The milling good-natured throngs overflowed the sidewalks. Bars and honky tonks and stores did a land-office business with bright lights sparkling. A dentist had just set up office in a tent squeezed between the hay and grain store and a dance-hall. There was a line of patients extending from the tent flaps, some of them half drunk.

"Well, they's so danged many new faces nobody's going to notice us much," Hank said sourly. "Not that we're a-going to find out anything."

Hammer Blue, a stocky hairpin curly blond hair that he was always combing, smiled around. "Right purty she-males around too....Maybe Ace himself'll be in cocking an eye."

Dal Casson remained silent. He knew there was going to be no chance to see Vergez. Hank watched him too closely.

They went into a side-street whisky mill and had a couple of drinks. Posing as a mule-skinner from the other side of the Pass, he asked the news about Jubal Ace. They'd heard plenty of talk about the rout of the Mintoll bunch up at Carroll Flats. The barkeep shook his head.

"Damn marshals buzzing around like flies at honey," he said. "But it's plain they ain't got no idea where-at Ace is. I call 'em 'damn marshals' 'cause when they clutter up a town, you lose some business. Certain characters of a shy retiring nature feel they ought to pull stakes when a badge-packer shows his snoot."

"I heard somebody say that Ace has gone over to the side of the Law," a customer put in. "Like turning State's evidence, sorta, they say. He plays with 'em and turns in men —and he'll git clemency."

Hank's face jerked. But Casson recalled what the Kid had told him about Ace's Texas matter. So he didn't worry about it.

Another man said, "Word's going around that Ace has got himself a new girl. Some even claim they know who she is and it'd pop the eyes outa your head. He always was a skirt-chaser. Why I heard...."

THEY stopped in at a few more bars and hung around a gambling hall. But nobody knew anything. A faro dealer whispered in Casson's ear, "I know where a tip on where Ace is holed up will git you a cool thousand dollars. I...." Casson galvanized. Over by a side door, a deputy marshal stood staring directly at Casson. And the latter recognized him as having been a guard at the State prison. They had known each other fairly well; the man had played checkers with him, through the bars of his cell, often. But the deputy marshal's eyes strayed away without interest and he idled forward to the front of the place.

Hank gave a sign and they left. Darkness came. But the torches and coal-oil lamps were so thick that almost every foot of the main road was splashed with pools of light. They left their ponies in a livery barn alley and Hank and Blue stepped into the bushes for a moment. Casson lolled against the corner of a combined dance-hall-saloon at the head of the alley. Bitter discouragement had sprung its roots in him.

Then a door to a stairs leading to the second floor of the building opened at his shoulder. He felt her before he saw her. Beth. She wore a new pair of white drill britches and a flaming red shirt. She looked like a vivid flower, laughing lightly over her shoulder at somebody coming down the stairs. His gasp of surprise brought her yellow-flecked eyes switching around.

"Dal...."

"Beth....ma'm....Come—"

She whipped the brand-new pearl-gray sombrero from her hair and slid it up beside her face. "Careful, Dal," she hissed. "Careful...."

"I've got to see you, Beth....I've been crazy worrying for you and—" He grasped her little shoulder before he knew it.

She slid from his fingers, turned the other way. Then the rattle of a man's spur chains and the king of the owlhoot, swaggering Jubal Ace, emerged from the doorway. He slapped on his pearl-gray sombrero. His arm went around the girl's waist familiarly. They went up the walk, swaying together. And Casson saw that Beth's new hat was a smaller replica of Jubal Ace's big fancy sombrero, even to the brilliantly-conchaed hatband.

The throng closed behind him as he stood trembling. Even as he took a stride he realized he couldn't jump Ace without endangering Beth. Then another thought came to him and bled all the power and antagonism from his veins. She wouldn't want Ace jumped. By all the signs, she was Ace's woman.

"Might as well be hitting the trail," Hank said from Casson's elbow. "I could uh told the Kid we was wasting our—"

Even as Casson realized it was now too late to do anything about Ace, Hammer Blue whistled softly and darted out a hand. "Stokey! That's Ace's lieutenant. The gent with him must be another of Ace's bunch then!" He pointed at a pair who were moving up the road just outside the gutter.

Stokey, Casson, saw, was a man who looked as if he'd been cut from a tombstone. Tall and slab-bodied. Somehow gray-faced, dish-flat, with vague smudged features. He moved with a certain jerkiness. Torchlight splashed in his eyes once and they were dull and empty looking. Then he saw the bandy-legged half-pint of a man half hopping to keep up with the tall Stokey. It was Little Mex who'd escaped from the Big House with him. The one who'd turned back to give himself up when his nerve broke that night years back.

Hank breathed sharply, hurriedly. His lips were wet. "We can burn 'em down....Come on. Just slip up in back of 'em and pull the triggers

point-blank. We can be gone in a sec in this crowd. Come—" He moved out, a vicious thin-bodied killer starving to strike. Hammer Blue followed.

"Easy," Casson called softly. But there was nothing soft about the steely round gun muzzle spike from his hand. They saw it when they trned. "No," he said.

"Nerve short?" sneered Hank. "Sand running outa your boots, huh? Come on, Hammer. We two can do it and—"

"No." He didn't quite savvy it himself. He was all ripped up inside anyway from seeing Beth with Jubal Ace. All he knew was that he and Little Mex belonged to the same brotherhood. Ex-convicts. They had gone through that prison break together. So he couldn't let any man put a gun muzzle in Mex' back.

Two orey-eyed gents lurched between them. Casson had to lower his Colts. When they were gone, Hank had sneaked a tiny derringer from his sleeve. He had it up, a little two-shot job. Sneering, he locked eyes with Dal Casson. "No," said Casson softly. Hank's mouth twisted up at one end and he tucked away his derringer.

THEY got their ponies and rode out. When they got into the barren land camp that night, Hank went straight to the Kid. Casson was called into the boss' cabin a few minutes later. He walked in to be covered by cocked Colts. Slamming down his stogie butt, one he had bought in town, he glared at Mintoll.

"What the hell's itching your gizzard now, Kid? Sometimes you give me a pain where they patch my pants! By grab, you do!"

Mintoll's fat cheeks quivered. "Hank told me. You stopped 'em from putting windas in the skulls of Stokey and another Ace gunhand."

Casson was more daring than ever. After seeing Beth and Jubal Ace together, nothing mattered. The one thing he had cared about in years, save hate, had been snuffed out. He called Mintoll a dumb hay-pitching bunkhouse work-dodger and a few other things. "Go ahead. Pull out your damn pistol. You've gummed up everything very nice so far."

"Now listen, Cass, you—"

"Aw, shut up! The jasper with Stokey was Little Mex. We were in prison together—and busted out together. I ain't letting nobody pump lead through the back of an old pard. Take it or leave it!"

Mintoll's jaw sagged, then began to hinge upward. His oilly eyes got a-glitter. "Hey, you're a one-time sidekick of a gent who's now in Ace's outfit? That's just what we want. That makes it perfect!"

"How?"

"That makes it possible, Cass, for you to join Ace's outfit as a spy. . ."

CHAPTER XVII

THE next morning he was back in Defiance with Hank tailing him like a malevolent shadow. Casson went into the bar part of the dance-hall from whose second story he'd seen Beth and Jubal Ace descend. It seemed like probing for a needle in the proverbial haystack. A thin chance. But it turned out to be incredibly easy. Along about ten o'clock the walking tombstone, Stokey, entered. He put down an eye-opener frozen-faced and waited. Casson kept looking for Little Mex.

A rider dismounted out front and pulled his eyes off Stokey too quickly when he came in. He stopped two feet away at the bar without giving him a flicker. Ordered a drink. He paused with it at his lips and the words were exchanged then. Without any movement of lips, an old Big House trick. The rider left. Even as he sauntered back to the bar, Casson figured he knew the answer. Ace had sent word down to Texas, to John Folsom. He was waiting for the reply. The rider came to say there was no word yet.

Casson slammed down a silver dollar truculently, hauled over the bottle, then shoved it in Stokey's direction. "Have one."

Stokey's dead eyes wheeled to him. "Says who? And why?"

"Long body and a short memory,

ain't you, Cotton," Cass growled back.

"The handle don't happen to be Cotton, pilgrim."

"Was two years ago when you put a lead pill 'tween Jib Cane's shoulder-blades over Fanesville way."

Stokey showed yellow teeth. "Never knowed Jib Cane. Never was in Fanesville. But if you're plumb aching to git your ticket punched to Hell, keep rattling your clapper."

Casson sneered. "Yes." This was the only practical way he could think of keeping Stokey here till Little Mex wandered in. If Little Mex did. Casson knew the owlhoot tribe well. Knew they were suspicious of any stranger who tried to shine up to them. Riding him raw was the one way to hold him there. He went on:

"It'd take a dumb two-bit to call on a tinhorn bluff. . . 'Cause he's so lunkheaded he don't know what he's bucking! Or who!"

Razor-thin brackets appeared opposite the ends of Stokey's slice of a mouth. He was everything to be expected of a segundo to a man like the owlhoot king. Cold and poised, with all the feeling of a timber wolf. Casson knew the type. "What cemetery did they name after you, pilgrim? Or do you change your handle every time you get whisky-locoed?" There was a grating sound behind his voice now.

"The name's Casson. *Mister* Casson to you!"

Stokey screwed a bony forefinger into his ear. "Right sorry, pilgrim. But that name don't strike terror to my feeble heart. And if you're building a play and that gangling pokey in the corner," he meant Hank, "is siding you, his chips are overdue to be cashed. My friend at the table down by the post there. . ." He made another gesture with his thumb. "Something about the smell of the pokey says Kid Mintoll's bunch to me, too."

Casson galvanized imperceptibly. The man Stokey indicated sat with a drawn gun beneath a table over in the dimness of the wall. The gun was on Hank. Hank, still so suspicious of Casson, he didn't know it.

"The kind of a tinhorn who has to have hired gun-passers to make up for a crippled draw, huh?" Casson flung. The thing hadn't gotten out of hand somehow. He couldn't let Stokey believe he was tied in to Mintoll.

STOKEY'S eyes masked. He was thinking the same thing. The last thing he wanted was a gun ruckus here. He might be recognized. He pocketed a hand and slapped a hundred-dollar bill on the bar. "Which says you won't match me at shucking a hogleg from a holster, pilgrim!"

Pulling out a roll, Casson matched the amount with ten-spots. It was a ticklish situation. He watched Stokey walk down toward the end of the bar. Behind it, a door was open there to give the place its morning airing. Stokey pointed at a starved cottonwood standing some ten feet beyond the door. "See the spot where the bark's rotted—just below the crotch? Keep your eye on it."

He about-faced and seemed to go limp and unjointed all over, shedding his normal stiffness. He started to whistle tunelessly, rubbing his nose. Then his hands jumped. He pivoted on a bootheel. And lead slugs beat into the tree at the bark bruise, chopping the bark away in flying pellets. It was only then anybody would have realized he had the guns in his skeletonal hands. It was very pretty and very scary.

Casson hung a smile on his face. In the back of his mind he checked down the fact that, as he had heard, Jubal Ace could out-draw any man he ever hired. The proprietor, an ex-card dealer with yellow parchment-like skin, came over. Smiling wide.

"Some shooting," he said. 'That deserves a drink. Dan—"

"Fair to middling," Casson conceded. "For a man using two guns and slinging so much lead nobody could tell how many missed...."

Stokey swallowed like he had a rusty nail caught in his throat, Adam's apple jiggling up and down. "Talk's cheaper 'n cow chips!"

"Maybe you know. Never dealt in the latter," Casson insulted. "Mister, mind scratching a match and throwing it out away from you?" he asked the boss.

He was gambling, coldly, wildly, again. Instinct told him this shooting test could have a heap to do with getting him into the Ace outfit. He locked eyes with Stokey again. Stokey stared, stiffened, then rubbed a hand over his own eyes. It was a peculiar gesture.

The dance-hall proprietor took a wooden match, scratched it on the seat of his pants. Hurriedly he snapped it clear of him by several feet. Casson's right-hand pistoned downward. The match flame danced in the morning dimness of the place. Next it, the place, drummed with the thunder of a gun explosion. The flame was gone in mid-air as if snuffed by an invisible hand. The match spun and bounced across the spur-scraped planks, blackened head gone. Dal Casson let out his breath softly. He hadn't been sure he could back the bluff; there had been some luck there.

"A round of drinks for that!" the boss cried with awe. "Why, I've seen some sweet gun-slinging in my time. I heard of some of the tricks of this Jubal Ace. But by jiminey—"

"Dal! Dal—" Coming in the side door, round-faced, grinning Little Mex shoved out a hand toward Casson. But Mex remembered to clamp up his lip before he sang out a last name. Men like him and Dal, ex-convicts, often changed their handles. "Why, you ring-tailed lowdown old—"

"You know this jasper?" Stokey snapped, still chagrined at being bested.

"This gent, his real handle is 'Cotton', ain't it, Mex?" Casson threw in quickly to make his play stick.

Little Mex beamed around. "Sure I know him," he said, answering Stokey first. "He's our kind." He walked over to the tombstonelike one and whispered in his ear. Then he came up to pump Casson's hand. "Nope, Dal, you're wrong. His name ain't 'Cotton', I swear. We'll just call him Chief Spotted Horse for now. How about some tonsil juice?"

IT WAS fixed, like that. Casson apologized to Stokey, swearing he'd mistaken him for this Cotton. Stokey said no hard feelings and hung out some yellow teeth for a smile. It wasn't. Still, as segundo of one of the biggest lobo outfits in the country, he was interested in Casson. The constant shift of his eyes to him was evidence of that as they had several drinks.

"We was about to drag our pins anyway, Dal. Why not slope along?"

"Got a friend you might like to meet," Stokey said.

"Fella called 'Ace'," muttered Little Mex. "First initial of 'J'."

So it was done, like that. They rode out of Defiance Hill and across the creek and turned north. They cut across country and ended up riding east after Little Mex squatted on a knoll for a full fifteen minutes. He was studying their back-trail and the countryside with a pair of field glasses.

"We gotta be right careful," Stokey said as they rode on. "Washita Bassett was seen up at Iron Horse. They say he was headed this way."

"Hate to have to face that danged badge-packer," Mex said. Casson knew what he meant. He referred to Young Washita Bassett, son of the famed elder Washita Bassett, one of the greatest marshals the Southwest had ever known. Young Washita was following in his footsteps. Folks still talked about the time he had single-handedly broken up a riot in Fero Junction, rescuing three men from a lynch-mad mob that had the hempen neckties around their necks. Bassett himself had been seriously wounded in the job, lying between life and death for months. One of the hombres he had rescued from the rope had been dubiously exonerated in court in the fatal shooting of the older Bassett.

The baby-faced younger Washita Bassett had become the idol of the Southwest after that incident. It was a recognized fact that the man who

ever made the mistake of killing him would have half a country hunting him down.

That was what Little Mex meant. That was why every owlhooter feared young Washita Bassett. Whoever might be forced to shoot him in a gun ruckus would be as good as tieing a hangman's knot around his own windpipe.

They cut onto a side trail, crossed a side-feeder of the creek that flowed by Defiance. Five-six miles on they eased down a slope to four houses set at a fork in the trail little more than a pair of cart tracks. One cabin had a fallen-in roof, plainly deserted. A toothless hag with an idiot-eyed, oversized boy beside her, squinted from the porch of the second place. The third, on the left of the fork, had a mangy store window rigged up in the front.

"Run by Montana Briggs," mentioned Stokey. "Real name of Prentiss. Ex-gunman. Still wanted up there for a killing. Owns the big place over there." He nodded to the right where a two-story house stood in amongst second-growth yellow pine. "Neat, ain't it? Fella like Briggs never asks no questions about who pays him the rent—just so long as it crosses his greasy palm."

They swung in behind the bigger house and dismounted. Only then did Dal Casson understand they were at Jubal Ace's hideout.

A couple of gun-slicks watched them idly. A third came out and took their ponies. They went in the back door and through a hall beyond the kitchen to the front. Stokey took Casson's arm and pushed him into the sitting room in the front. They were just in time to witness a scene.

"Anything more to say, Joe?" came Jubal Ace's voice. The front windows of the room were blanketed and Ace sat at a table with a lamp on it in a far corner. One man stood in front of the table, two others a little back from him. There was something about it like a trial.

From the doorway, Casson saw the front man shake his head mutely. Nothing more to say.

"Think it was worth it, saying it?" asked Ace quietly. He smiled as if he were about to laugh lightly.

The man said, speaking as if his tongue were gummed up, "What do you mean, Jube? What—"

"This," said Jubal Ace. He pulled out a drawer in the table, making no move toward the pair of .45 Colts laying at one end. "This." He plucked a gun from the drawer and shot the man twice, once through the chest and once through the forehead. He was dead meat before his head rolled on the bare floor.

After the body was out, with the other two gone, Ace yanked a cork from a bottle and took a deep slug. "By God, that'll teach 'em to try to tell me my business! To try to tell me what to do with a woman. . ." Then he realized there was a stranger present and hooked his strange eyes into Dal Casson.

Casson met his stare evenly, unflinching.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT HAD been simple with Ace. When Little Mex told how Casson had been in the Big House with him, Ace was about satisfied. "Nobody's ever known Jubal Ace to turn down a good gun yet."

"He's better 'n good," said Stokey, the first-class lieutenant, sullenly. "Or else luckier 'n the Devil's favorite."

"Always like lucky gents around me," Ace said. "I'm lucky myself; born that way. I can't lose. What're you doing in these parts?"

Truthfully enough, Casson told him he had come in to kill Miles Vergez, the ex-lawman. "Vergez, eh. . ." Ace's eyebrow went up. His gaze drifted to a chair where a smaller edition of his pearl-gray Stetson lay. Casson had already seen it; he wondered if Beth were upstairs.

Further talk was cut short by the ringing crack of a rifle. A little later one of the men came in and said they thought they'd seen a rider snooping up behind the rise.

That was all there had been to it. Toward the end of the confab, it was plain the owlhoot king had only half

his mind on the proceedings. Little Mex had taken Casson up the road a few hundred yards, then turned up the wooded slope. Part of the camp of this strange lobo hideout was up there. Yet a snooping badge-packer would have only figured it for the campfire of a couple of trail-riders. Beyond the fire, beside a thicket, there was a dugout. More men dozed or played cards down in it.

Hunkered down, Casson and Little Mex had some stew and java. Casson brought out a half-smoked stogie. "This big fella's right sure of himself. Never saw a hideout as open as this before."

Little Mex chuckled. "Who'd ever suspect anything? Just an old house in a run-down bump on the trail. But they's another camp with a dugout down the other way past the house. A party might just happen down the track to the house, but they'd never get out alive. And on top of that, the top floor of the place has nothing but gunmen in it—watching all the time."

"Nothing but gunmen," repeated Casson, thinking of Beth.

"Nothing but," said Mex, studying him. "You're getting kinda peaked, Dal. You—"

"Hear Ace has got a new skirt he's strong for."

"Yeah, but she lives back in a cabin behind the big house. Stay clear of it. Yesterday, Jube larrupped the face off one of the boys with his quirt 'cause he caught him snooping around there. He—"

"Wonder how all the talk 'bout that dame is getting around?" Stokey stood over them, swaying slightly. It was plain he'd been riding the redeye heavily. He drew out a pint bottle and sloshed off some without offering any. It seemed to make no change in his mouldy-hued face.

"Jube's lost his head," he said, low-voiced. "That fella he shot, Joe, he was asking what Jube was going to do about the woman. The boys, they ain't feeling nice about shooting Joe or—" He looked at Casson and cursed. "Gabbing too much," and he went stalking off through the brush.

Little Mex nodded. "Things ain't so good. The bunch is ornery. Ace don't seem to give a hang about pulling any road-agent jobs or anything. There was some talk about stopping the Limited down beyond Fargo Plains. But he didn't do anything about it. That woman. . ."

"Some are saying a showdown is building 'tween Ace and this lobo called Mintoll, Kid Mintoll," Casson suggested.

Little Mex shrugged. "The boys are really drooping a horn."

"Don't they know that girl can mean a heap of money?"

Little Mex cocked an eyebrow. "How'd you know that, Dal, huh?" When Casson gave him a slow wink and said a birdie told him, Little Mex laughed. "All right, all right. . .

"What do you mean?"

"Can't say exactly, Dal. . . 'Cept Jube don't seem in no hurry to cash in on her. One of the boys rode over into Lafayette County to git off a wire to Texas about her. No answer's come yet and Jube ain't sent another telegram."

Casson drew calmly on his stogie despite the storm brewing inside him. Mex chewed away on his cut plug. There were muffled curses from the dugout and they heard Ace's name mentioned.

"You see what I mean?" Mex said. "These fellas are fightin' men, the kind who don't like to let triggers git too cold. And now they're beginning to say the girl is bad luck to 'em! Pizen! Jube, he don't seem to care."

CASSON thought of that smaller sombrero of Beth's, the replica of Ace's. It made his heart twist hard.

"You see," Mex went on, idly drawing a design in the bare earth, "the boys can't understand what Jube aims for. Somehow they got wind of the business with Deuce Dressen, the gambler down in Defiance."

Casson perked up his head.

"Dressen is stinking with money like a bank itself. He'll plunge for five thousand on the turn of a card. Him and Jube knew each other from

a long time back. And the word is Dressen offered Jube fifty thousand —*fif-ty*, Dal—for the girl! Dressen figures to deal with her father down in Texas then himself."

"And?" Casson prodded, blood pounding in his temples.

Little Mex shoved his tongue into a cheek of his dark face and scratched a big "X," a crossout, over his design in the dirt. "Jube just didn't do nothing about it. Sent word to Dressen he'd see. . . He's still seeing, it seems like. To the bunch, fifty thousand split amongst 'em seems like a heap lot of hay."

A man came in and told Mex it was his shift to keep watch down the road. Casson rolled the stogie butt over in his hard mouth. Now that he knew where the hideout was—and that Ace had no plans—the logical thing would be to try to slip off and return to Mintoll. Getting away would be a difficult task. Maybe after dark. . . But he knew he wasn't going to try; he had to see Beth first. His big hands folded into balls. He told himself he was a fool. He wanted nothing more than to shake the living daylights out of the fickle coquetting little fool. Yet he knew he *had* to see her.

He napped during the afternoon, propped against a tree. They had stew again after sunset for supper. There was little talk from the men; they were proddy and ornery. There was a little banter as they squatted around the coals of the fire afterward, but there was more passing of the jug in moody silence than anything else. Casson went down into the dugout for a short spell. Then he came out, dragging his blanket with him and complaining he couldn't sleep for lack of air down there. He went off among the trees loudly and rolled in under a bush.

He didn't have long to wait. A darker blot stirred against the night. Casson emitted a slight snoring sound and kept his breathing slow-paced as he realized Stokey stood over him. After some minutes, Stokey moved off, but Casson waited another hour before he shed his blanket silently and rose.

Skulking through the trees, he worked along the side of the slope parallel to the road below. Through a gap in the tree tops he made out the upper story of the big house under the low sulking moon. He put his back to it, found the trace of a curving path, and climbed along it. It was a man's slight cough that warned him. Crouched, he froze.

At first he saw nothing. A breeze ruffled the foliage and the cold glow of starlight flowed through from above. Ace was there. Casson saw his peaked sombrero first above the grass. Then Ace swept the hat from his head and leaned over. Casson saw Beth as the other man towered over her. They were standing down from a darkened cabin. Beth's laugh drifted to Casson and tore at his insides. The starglow brightened and he could make out the smile on Jubal Ace's face.

Then Ace reached for her, swept her into his arms. Casson straightened, hand vising on a gun butt, half drawing it. He would kill the man for daring to— Only there was no outcry, no protest from Beth. Their profiles met. . .merged. . . She didn't struggle against him.

"Hey!" cried Ace good-naturedly. She had stepped out of his arms, coal-black hair glistening as her sombrero tumbled onto her shoulders. Then Casson saw that she had plucked one of Ace's guns from his holster, that she held it levelled on him. The click of the dogged-back hammer snapped on the night. Ace said, chuckling, "You know I'm smart enough not to have it loaded, don't you?"

SHE made the instinctively mistake, turning it away to try it. Ace sprang on her, grabbing for the Colts. It went off with a thunderous crash, the slug ripping through the brush with a whistling sound. And it horneted within a half inch of the crouched Dal Casson's head. His natural reaction was to duck and some kind of outcry broke from him before he could restrain himself. Jubal Ace didn't seem to hear it at

first; he had wrenched the weapon from the girl's grasp, still chuckling.

"As the daughter of a lawman, you should know better than to be fooled by a trick like that," Ace said. "Why—" Then he had turned away from her and was leaping through the brush.

He was on Casson before either of them quite realized it. Casson fumbled his gun. Jubal Ace sensed there was a man there and slashed down with his gun barrel. Leaning away from the blow, Dal Casson swung a fist. He landed home and the Colts flew from Ace's hand, but the latter got in with a blind kick to the belly that sent Casson reeling backward.

Both men recovered and threw desperate punches. Casson felt as if a mule's kick had exploded on the side of his head, even as he saw big Ace tilt backward and drop to one knee under one of Dal's own blows. Again Casson tried to swing a gun from a holster. A piece of brush got in the way and once more he fumbled, and Ace came lunging in with a knife he'd pulled.

It's blade ripped into the flesh of Casson's left shoulder. It was like liquid flame as the air got at the opened flesh. But he knew if he went down he would be whipped, that there would be no chance of saving Beth. So he moved in, striking, striking with his right fist. It bounced off bone. Jubal Ace went backward stiffly, crashing down among the grass. Men came running up from the main path, shouting as they advanced, calling out to Ace. Casson knew it was time for him to get the hell out of there. H couldn't help Beth then. If there were ponies handy, it would have been different.

He got back to his bedding-down place outside the dugout, holding his cut arm, crawled into the blanket as cries sounded around the camp. Inside of what seemed like moments, a man came striding through the brush. Even before he cocked a wary eye, Casson knew it was Stokey. Stokey stood over him a full half minute as Casson feigned sleep and tried to forget the pain of the gashed arm. Then Stokey went away, muttering under his breath.

It might be a trap. Casson kept his breathing slow and relaxed. Stokey could be standing off there, waiting. Casson heard somebody moving toward him furtively. Casson was gripping his shoulder hard, trying to stem the flow of blood. Then there was breathing close above him. And Little Mex spoke.

"You all right, Dal?"

"Anybody near?"

"Stokey's gone. Somebody tried to get the head man, they say. . . You need a drink bad, huh?"

"Yeah, Mex." Mex passed over a pint bottle and Casson sat up and took a swig.

"Your shoulder—holy Pete!" Mex breathed. He went to work on it, cutting away the shirt. He left and came back with some rags and another shirt. After a while he got Casson bandaged up and the flow of blood stopped. They had another drink together. "Bad, huh, Dal?"

"Not so. . . He was lucky. Got a knife into me. . ."

"He's one big hunk of poison to cross, Dal," Little Mex said after a few moments. "No good. . ." He listened in the night wind, then went on, scratching an ear as he spoke. "Look, Dal. Let's you and me slip across the Line. Down there, a fella, he can live good. Plenty tequilla. Pretty girls. . . Sure, nothing to worry about. For a few dollars a month, he can live good. No damn John Laws around. Dal, what the hell's the sense of trying to live by the gun, huh? You tell me."

Casson stared off into the night, crazily. "Funny thing is, Mex, I'm not trying to live by the gun now." He had never thought of it that way before.

Little Mex said, "No matter, Dal . . . Down there in Old Mexico, a man can live without struggling. . . lie in the sun and drink a heap of *vino* and not worry none and. . . He broke off, shaking his head. He saw that Casson wasn't listening. That was what had given Little Mex that nickname. Most of his friends had

forgotten what his real handle was. For years, even up in the Big House, he had been thinking and talking of how easily a man could live south of the Line, how easy a human being could get along. He was always about to go down there himself. . . next week, next month.

Now he swore softly. "All right. Maybe I could get you out of here. But—I won't do it, not even for you, Dal. Ace has always treated me right. And—I'm not sure—but somethun tells me you're working for Kid Mintoll."

"I'm playing my own hand—lone—and without much to back it aside from nerve," Casson cut in drily.

"All right. Here's the message she sent you. She—"

"Who? Beth Vergez?"

"Yes, sure. She said she's all right. That there's nothing to fear from Jubal. . . But for you to stay away. She don't want for anything to happen to you, Dal. . . Is it bad?"

Casson stared off into the night, mouth pinched into a lipless seam. "Not good, Mex, not good. . . Nothing bad can happen to me 'cept losing her. That's all. . ."

CHAPTER XIX

THE next morning he had to be careful to conceal the stiffness of his left shoulder from the other men in the camp. But with everybody grumbling and wondering what was going to happen, he didn't come in for much attention. He was just putting down his second mug of java after breakfast when Stokey happened around. Stokey, plainly suspicious, asked him how he slept last night. Casson said like a rock and asked him about the rumors concerning Washita Bassett the marshal. Stokey clammed up and went away.

Casson sat and gnawed on a stogie and wondered about making some kind of a desperate play to get Beth Vergez out of there. But, on second thought, he realized Ace would know where Miles Vergez was. How he lay helpless, nigh onto death with that wound in his neck, easy prey for anybody who walked in with a gun. Then, about midday, Stokey came around again. He said the boss wanted to see Casson. They went up to the house. Jubal Ace had a lump on the left side of his jaw from Casson's fists. But he smiled pleasantly even though, in the first glance, Casson knew Ace suspected him of having been the man in the bushes last night.

Ace told Stokey to leave them alone and poured a couple of drinks. Casson sat down across the table and fired up one of his stogies.

"Cigar smoker, eh?" said Ace. And pulled open a desk drawer. For a moment, Dal Casson wondered if it might be the old gun trick again. But the lobo boss brought out a box of cigars. "Here, help yourself to a couple or a half dozen. Have 'em sent in specially for me from Havana. That's over in Cuba, you know. Very special. . ." He bit his eyes into Casson's.

Without veering his stare, Dal Casson helped himself. Both men lifted their drinks and downed them, eyes still locked. Then it was that Jubal Ace frowned and looked away, slapping at a fly on the table.

"Hear you're pretty slick shakes with a hogleg, Casson," the outlaw boss said after a moment.

"Aim to take care of myself in a showdown," Casson admitted.

Ace nodded. "Neat trick, that one of shooting at a thrown lighted match."

Dal Casson couldn't restrain a grin as he found himself liking this big outlaw. "You know it, too? The disturbance caused by the passage of the bullet close enough extinguishes the match?"

Ace grinned back. "Uh-huh. Only, from what I hear, the head of the match was knocked off too — when you shot."

"Lucky that time, I reckon," Casson said.

"Lucky a lot of times maybe," Ace said. And they locked stares again, held it like a pair of silent duellists.

Stokey re-entered to say the two men down in Defiance Hill hadn't returned yet; they were overdue. He left and Ace addressed Casson with-

out looking at him. Wanted to know what he knew about this Kid Mintoll.

Casson shrugged. "I been around. I've been in the Big House. I've been living on the owlhoot. A man hears plenty. They say he's plumb tough medicine to buck."

"But he never bucked Jubal Ace before, by grab!"

"He is now?"

"Thinks he is. That hairpin's getting plumb fat between the ears, Casson. Mark my words on that!" He toyed with a buckskin glove lightly. It lay on the table near his right hand. "Wouldn't try to pull a double-cross on me, would you, Casson?"

Dal Casson studied him and knew suddenly he never would. The realization was upsetting to his half-formed plans. Then he found himself shaking his head. "If the day ever comes, Ace, that you and me have to smoke it out—I'll call my shots first. Depend on that, by thunder!"

"Next time, I will," Ace said quietly. He pushed the buckskin glove away from him and there was the dull thud of metal. "Double barrelled derringer in there, Casson. My mistake. I apologize. You—"

There was some loud talk up the road and Stokey came in hurriedly. "One of the men, Hash, just came in from the north trail. Somebody told him—" He broke off, flashing a glance at Casson.

Jubal Ace said, "Shoot. . .Casson's all right."

Stokey said, "The word is—it must be crazy—that Washita Bassett, the marshal, is dead."

"What?" Ace was on his feet.

"Yep. And the story goes that you're responsible for killing him. Yes, Jubal, they say you had that girl, Beth Vergez, do the job for you."

"That's locoed! She hasn't been away from here!"

"Your men don't know that, Jubal!"

"What do you mean, Stokey?"

Stokey spat it drily. "I mean—if that locoed rumor is true—the whole Defiance country is going crazy. And you can't depend on your bunch now. That's what I mean!" He tacked on an oath.

IT SOUNDED locoed as blazes. But inside a couple of hours, one of the men who'd been down in Defiance Hill hit into the camp with a badly wounded pony and a scared nerve. The other hombre who'd been with him would never come back. He was dead. The first one started to talk before he got to the house. Stokey got hold of him and brought him inside. Dal Casson followed.

That gent's story was strictly bad. Washita Bassett, the best-loved lawman in the Southwest, had been killed up at Jordanville, the other side of Defiance. Been killed in a barroom there where he'd been seen entering a private room with a woman. One of the witnesses, a man who'd seen him go in, was Sad O'Neil, the owner of the General Store out at the crossroads.

"That—" Casson caught himself gasping, knowing O'Neil was a Kid Mintoll man.

"Uh-huh," the man went on. There had been another witness. And they both swore the girl Bassett was last seen with was Beth Vergez, daughter of Miles Vergez. Just to clinch it, a white silk scarf with the initials "E. V." had been found beside Bassett's stiffening body. "E. V." for Elizabeth Vergez. Casson thought of that scarf he had seen Mintoll have in his cabin, then realized what the snaky Kid had done.

He was spiking Jubal Ace's guns, in a way of speaking. Because he had lost possession of the woman himself, he had figured out a way to make the country too hot for Ace who held her. How he figured to clear her if he ever got his hands on her again Dal Casson couldn't see at that moment. All he understood then was the enormity of the thing Mintoll had done.

Beth Vergez was as good as accused of murder. Bassett had been found shot in the back with a .32.

Ace made a half-strangling sound. He said, "She couldn't have done it! She's no murderer! She—"

The hombre who'd come in from Defiance wiped sweat from his forehead. "You tell that to the bunch starting out from Defiance. They know you're up here, Ace! They say you were seen in town with her. . . They say she did this 'cause she'd fallen for you—like the other dames! She—"

Ace leaned across the table and struck the man across the mouth. He fell back, bleeding from the lips, cursing some.

"Mintoll did this!" Casson cried.

"You're telling me!" Jubal Ace snarled back.

Another rider came in from the north. Stokey came back panting with his story. He was a hoeman from up the line. He said a posse was already coming down that way. Ace grabbed up a bottle of redeye.

"That isn't going to do any good," Casson said calmly, so calmly he himself was surprised. "You—me—we can't prove the girl wasn't there. Not now—anyway. But they'll be crazy, those bounty hunters. We've got to protect her, Ace!"

"You mean—get her out of here? Hell, let 'em come! They'll get holes in their heads! They'll get their bellies salivated and—" Jubal Ace was suddenly haggard and a little scared looking.

Stokey put it drily, bluntly. "Wouldn't bet on the bunch this time out, Jubal. . . Some of 'em already have pulled stakes."

Ace sucked his wind, eyes travelling around wildly.

"We got to get her out before they close in," Casson said, striding toward the door.

"Are you with me?" Ace yelled.

"All the way—just so long as we can get her out of here, Ace!"

Stokey nodded glumly. When they got outside, they found there was Little Mex and two other men. That made six in all. Jubal Ace came down from the cabin with the girl. Her eyes and Casson's met. Then they mounted and with two extra horses swung toward the westering sun. Most of the rest of the bunch had already pulled stakes. One of the ones still around called:

"You'll never make it! The skirt's a danged jinx!"

CHAPTER XX

THEY pushed westward at a stiff hand lope. Casson saw that Ace had already told Beth about what had happened. Once as they paused to let their ponies drink at a creek crossing, she spoke.

"Let me face them," she said determinedly. "I can tell them I never met Washita Bassett and—"

Dal Casson and Ace broke out with negatives simultaneously. Sloping on, they moved across the Defiance range. Once they saw a rider watching them from a range. His field glasses glinted in the sunset. Just some curious forty-per-and-beans cowhand, Ace said it was. "We'll cut up this arroyo here." When they came out of it, they noticed the sixth man, a fellow named Long Red, was gone. He had dropped off.

"I read it in a book once about rats and a sinking ship," Ace said, then acted as if he'd like to bite off his tongue.

"Only this ship isn't sinking," Casson said as cheerfully as he could.

"That's right!"

An hour later, in the prolonged twilight, guns snarled at them as they forded another creek. Both the extra ponies went down. There was nobody to fire back at; the other party, a bunch from town, had been throwing down with rifles. Grabbing the bridle of the girl's pony, Casson swung her downstream, southward, away from the shots. The others joined them as they made it into the trees on the opposite bank. Jubal Ace had been veering northward to get out of the country. Now they were forced to swing to the south, knowing they were cut off toward the north.

"That damn Long Red," Stokey said disgustedly.

The others nodded. There was nothing else to say. Red had gone over to the hunters, tipping them the way in which Ace and his party were heading. The men themselves would have been willing to gamble, to try

to cut their way through. But with the woman with them, it was a different matter.

The moon rose like a fat jaundiced traitor and Jubal Ace cursed it under his breath. It was one of those sultry sweaty nights with a storm in the making. "Why can't it come and wipe out our trail sign and—" Ace snorted.

"Shut down!" Casson snapped, lifting a hand. And they caught the pulse of hoof-beats on their back-trail.

Then they were pressing on, riding for their hides. They swung onto an alkali strip suddenly. Gunmen waiting there at either side of a cutbank threw down on them with a hail of lead. Casson and Jubal Ace hit the ground running at once and returned the fire. There were screams on the night and one man came plunging down the bank with crimson spurting from his forehead. Casson and Ace held the road till the others could withdraw. Then they hit the leather and retreated themselves. Casson passed an empty-saddled horse plunging wildly with a wound in its withers. That left four of them and the girl.

There was no way to hit but directly south after that. And as they spurred their horseflesh on, Casson was thinking how one of those men he'd seen at the cutbank reminded him of the Mintoll bunch. Then he knew they were up against it. The countryside was up in arms against them. But with Kid Mintoll in on the play, drawing chips aaginst them as well, the odds were too heavy.

They weren't going to get through. They swerved into a gulch much later in the night after having cut across a low ridge. Halfway down it Casson sighted another pack of manhunters entering from the other end. They had to reverse themselves and Stokey's mare began to limp.

"I can hole up somewheres and lie low mebbe and—"

"We stick together," Jubal Ace declared.

Silently Casson agreed. In the final showdown, and it had to come, every man able to swing a gun would be that much more help in protecting the girl. Hidden in a patch of mesquite, they watched another bunch of riders pass. Ace got them into a creek and they followed its course through the water for a few miles, throwing off pursuit momentarily. They got into another valley and Casson recognized it as the one running down from Medicine Creek.

"Let's push the other way," he called to Casson. "There is a place where maybe we can hide out for a spell. Last place they'd look for us." He told about the crossroads store run by Sad O'Neil as a front for the Mintoll outfit. "O'Neil and all the pack'll be out on the hunt."

ACE agreed. There was no chance of cutting through to freedom now; the whole country was a-boil. Possibly, at the store, they could wait and even hold out till cooler heads got control.

A couple of miles on, Little Mex gave a sharp cry and lurched almost out of the kak. Casson was over beside his ex-partner in a flash. The little fellow had been hit in the side in the last skirmish but hadn't wanted to say anything about it. They had to proceed even more slowly after that. There was a hazel streak in the east with the thunder of the slow-building storm muttering sullen in the north when they finally sighted the store. The building was completely dark. No ponies were in the shed when Casson scouted around it. They broke in the back door.

Casson was helping Mex up onto the back platform. Then the latter gasped and slipped and went pitching backward into the yard. He reeled around as dazzlingly bright lightning, like a great gout of broad daylight, ripped the graying mask of night from the landscape. From the hill on the road to Defiance came a shout. A bunch of bounty-hunters, late starters, were coming down that way. It was a cruel twist of Fate.

Rifles crackled out. Casson leaped to the ground and grabbed Little Mex as he buckled. Lead spattered around the tall Casson. But he lift-

ed Mex clean off the ground and managed to get him in the back door. It was wasted labor. The little fellow had already breathed his last.

Casson got the door barred. Ace yelled orders. "Get all the rifles and short-guns you can find pronto in the store. They don't know how many we got. Maybe we can make 'em think it's a big part of the bunch and bluff 'em. . . Maybe—"

Gunfire splashed the glass of the front windows and the fight was on. Casson and Ace took their stand in the front with Stokey guarding the back. In the first rush, some of the barroom toughs from town succeeded in reaching the porch. One of Casson's hot guns clicked empty. Another was shoved at him. He half turned and saw the girl crouched and reloading extra weapons for them.

"Keep down, Beth!" he warned her. Then he turned back and shot at one of the men at the front door. The other broke and leaped from the porch with a shattered gun arm.

Ace's guns hosed lead at a handful trying to get up to the porch from the side. And the first wind-whipped sheet of rain came down as the bounty-hunters drew off for a spell. But it was only a lull; neither Ace nor Casson wanted to talk. They knew the die was cast. They were holed up, discovered. It was only a matter of time. More men would come.

Stokey's gun snarled out back. Ace went halfway back to see if he was all right. Stokey said it was a cinch back there. Few of them were trying to bust in from that end because the ground was too open and there wasn't enough protection for them. "The dirty reward-hunters, a low-down pack of murderers!"

Daylight settled over the earth, a drab gray light that was blurred by the sprays of rain occasionally. Ace nodded at the rain as he took a drink from a whisky bottle on the counter. "They won't be able to burn us out, anyway."

"Shut up!" Casson said, thinking of the girl.

There was sporadic firing from the trees. Once half a dozen men, back in their saddles, came swirling at the front of the place to try to pot the defenders with a storm of lead. Three saddles went away empty as Casson, fighting mad when he saw a slug hit a barrel inches from the girl, rushed wildly onto the porch to answer their fire.

About an hour passed. Then Stokey called from the rear. A bunch, he said, were coming down the trail from the valley. It was impossible to distinguish them in the blurring rain and drifting mist. Casson and Jubal Ace looked at each other. If it were Kid Mintoll—

Inside of a few minutes, there was a fresh concerted rush at the front, with more than a score of horsemen launching themselves in the attack. Casson's stiff left arm throbbed so he could hardly lift a gun. A piece of lead chipped his cheek. He felt a burning sensation and saw crimson staining a fresh bullet hole in his pants over his right thigh. Beth grabbed his arm a moment to steady him. Then he was firing again. Once more the riders were driven off.

Stokey called. "I just got a glimpse of one of the boys back here, Jubal. . . It's a Mintoll fella I recognized. He's around somewheres."

This was it. It had come. . .

CHAPTER XXI

THEY waited. It was nerve-breaking. There was scattered fire from a distance, enough to keep them busy and watchful.

"Something's wrong," Ace muttered. "That Kid, he—"

It was Beth who half cracked under the strain. She started for the bullet-ripped front doors to get around the barricade of barrels they'd put there. "I can't let you two die! I—"

Casson caught her and pulled her back. "Keep down and behave yourself," he said roughly. He got a half-smoked stogie lighted, teeth working on it. It was strange what a man's mind did when he was waiting to die. Things out of his past came to him. How Miles Vergez had blasted his life by sending him to

prison. Somehow that didn't seem very important though any more. He thought of how he had escaped. Back came a memory of how he went over the trestle, expecting a deputy's slug in his back any moment. And the unanswered mystery of why it had never come.

He thought, too, of how he had practically outslicked the Mintoll bunch single-handedly that time. Only Ace had come into the picture and everything had gone haywire. And Beth was where she was now, with a noose hanging over her, because his locoed story of a wealthy lost father had as good as come true.

He galvanized. Of course it was too quiet, because Kid Mintoll was busy doing something else. It hit him like a gun barrel blow as he recalled the tunnel from the back of the store. That was where the Kid would be. Working in to deal them a surprise blow in the back!

The fire doubled, then tripled from along the road. Men were working with rifles from a safe distance, peppering the front of the place. Horsemen came flashing down from both sides, triggering and swinging off before they got within murderous range.

Casson whirled in the acrid gunsmoke inside the store. "I'll send Stokey up here! Hold 'em, Ace, there's trouble!" He ran past the counter into the back. It was gloomy back there. And then he saw Stokey down, a bullet in his back, dead as he lay on his face. Muzzle flame spurted at Casson just as he spotted the open trap door.

The bullet nicked him over one eye. But it was enough to send him stumbling, blinded with blood. As he lurched behind a packing crate, he mopped his face with his sleeve. The blood went but shock left him blind for several seconds that seemed ageless as all time. He tried to shout a warning to Ace, but it was lost in the gunfire.

Then he could see again. Sad O'Neil, bald head gleaming, was already out of the tunnel. A second man was leaping out at his heels. And behind and below appeared the head and shoulders of Kid Mintoll, oily hair agleam. O'Neil spotted Casson; their weapons slammed out at close quarters. O'Neil, in his surprise, missed. Casson didn't. O'Neil went down with half his chest blown open. Crouched, the second one triggered.

His first slug whistled by Casson's head. His second bit into the ceiling because he was already sinking with a bullet hole in his cheek. At such close quarters it wasn't just a case of wounding a man. It was plain brutal death. Then, as Casson stumbled on his hit thigh, like a great cat Kid Mintoll leaped clear of the hole, riding the triggers on both his white-handled bestarred weapons. Casson fired with his right gun. His left was gone, lost as his gashed shoulder betrayed him.

His slug hit Mintoll in the right shoulder, pinning him back against the wall a moment. In a fighting rage, Casson triggered again, out to blast him straight into a Boothill hole. Later he was glad he didn't. His gun hammer hit an empty shell. The next one was spent too.

TEETH bared in a gloating smile, Mintoll braced his body to get his second weapon levelled. Thinking of how Mintoll had framed that girl, Casson, heedless for his own life, leaped on him. His empty gun crashed down and Mintoll sank to the floor, the black snake lash slipping half off his shoulder.

Another man's head appeared in the hole leading to the tunnel. Plucking up Mintoll's fallen gun, Casson shot him dead through the skull. The man dropped back into the tunnel. Going to hands and knees, Casson peered into the hole. But no more were coming.

As he pushed himself off slowly, horror clutched at him. The firing out front, from all around the place in fact, had ceased. Maybe Ace had been struck down and the girl—

He scarcely dared to look into the front of the store. But Jubal Ace was erect behind the barrel barricade. And just behind him stood Beth with another reloaded Colt ready. Ace

said hoarsely, in answer to Casson's cry:

"Three-four U. S. marshals with a posse of their own just came down the hill from Defiance, Casson. They're driving back the mob. Some of them latter coyotes've already took to their heels. The marshals ordered us to stop firing. When they get control, they'll want to get Beth out. . ."

Behind him Casson heard the gun-clubbed Mintoll stir. "Don't let her out till I give the orders, Ace. I got a little job back here!"

"You damn well bet, Casson!"

In the other room, Casson closed the door. He found a bucket of brackish water and doused Mintoll's head as the other sat dazed. Casson frisked him for weapons and removed two bowie knives and a derringer. Beth called through the door to learn what he was doing.

"Don't come in," Casson said harshly. "It ain't going to be pretty. All right, Mintoll! Get up!" He had already stripped the black snake whip from him.

"Going to turn me over to the Law?" Mintoll said in that high voice, mocking. "Swell chance! I can always say you was in my outfit and—"

"How'd you get Washita Bassett killed?"

Kid Mintoll froze up. He shrugged. "Prove I had a hand in it. Prove that—" Then he threw up a plump arm as he saw it coming and the shriek of pure animal terror ripped from him.

The snakeskin lashed down over his shoulders, the end curling around his neck and biting off a piece of cheek. It wasn't nice. Outside, in the store, it sounded sickening. But it took only about five minutes. And then the man who loved to beat people broke. Cowering on the planks, eyes globes of craven white as he begged for mercy. All the upper part of his shirt was lashed from his body. Bloody welts stained his chest. A deep cut, leather-bitten, ran down from one eye.

But he was whipped, broken, ready to sign his very life away to escape more lashing. That was when Casson told them to pass him paper and pencil from the store shelf. Beth herself stood in the now open doorway writing down what Dal Casson dictated and what Mintoll nodded meekly to. It was how the sly Kid Mintoll had plotted the killing of Bassett.

How he had picked up his trail. Then gotten a dance-hall girl to send word she knew where Jubal Ace was holed up. Bassett had kept the meeting with her in the barroom backroom as arranged. There he had been shot in the back, fatally.

"But I didn't do that," Mintoll whined. "Sad—Sad O'Neil, he was the one put the slug in him."

Beth's scarf had been planted. When asked where the dance-hall girl was after she had been whisked from the scene, Mintoll only shrugged. Casson realized she was dead.

"All right. Sign this—here. It'll do for now. But remember, if you try to go back on this after the marshals take you into custody, I'll come back to lash you again! I'll come back if it has to be from the gates of Hell itself!"

Mintoll cringed as if he feared Casson would take to the lash again. Then, slobbering like a woman, he put his signature to the document. Dal Casson held the woman by the arms briefly.

"There won't be any question of hanging you now, Beth. . ."

THE marshals had control out in front of the place. Handcuffed, Kid Mintoll had been half carried out. They had Beth out there, too.

"You helped save her life, Ace," Casson said wearily. "I think I can slip you outa here." He meant by the tunnel.

Ace smiled very sadly. Shook his head. "I only go if I know some day I can come back to her—to Beth . . .I—well, you know how I must feel. You love her, too, I know now."

Ace shrugged. "It's one or the other of us!" He slid a gun into a holster, tapped it. "Got one loaded."

Casson reloaded a weapon. "All right."

Ace looked around. They were near the middle of the store. "Each man walks ten paces and turns and fires." Outside, one of the marshals called but they ignored him. "Ten paces—on his honor."

"Ten," Casson said.

They stepped closer, turned and put their backs together. In the dull bullet-riddled interior, they paced it off. Both men counted hoarsely. "Nine—" said Casson.

One more and he whirled, stabbing for his holster. Ace was just coming around. In that awful dread second their eyes hooked into each other. Then the guns were up and barking. Casson shot twice, felt a bullet pull at his sleeve. His Colt falling to his feet, Ace fell back against the counter. His hand started to his chest where Casson's bullet was. Ace smiled cynically, peculiar eyes fading.

"You—you got eyes like mine. . . same effect, I mean. Sorta hypnotic . . .only—yours. . .stronger."

CHAPTER XXII

DAL CASSON, Beth Vergez at his side, stood in the Defiance Hill hotel room. Old Miles Vergez, improved incredibly now that he saw his beloved adopted daughter safe before him, lay propped up in bed. He lifted his glass to Casson.

"Dal, I can never thank you for—"

"Shut down," Casson said harshly and yet with a strange gentleness behind it. "I got a speech to make—then I'm leaving." He drew away as Beth instinctively caught at his arm.

"Listen, Miles Vergez. . . Once—once you broke my life. I came back to find you. I made you promise anything if I got your girl back safe. I said there was a price attached."

Vergez nodded grimly. "What?"

Casson tried to sneer. "I double-crossed you, Miles. I got a promise from your daughter to marry me when I took her out of Mintoll's camp! I wanted your sleep to be haunted like mine—wanted you to weep blood! Because your girl would be hitched to a dirty outlaw, an escaped convict! Now—you see?"

"A Vergez keeps a promise," Miles said.

"I will," Beth said.

"No! No!" Casson cried. "Because I can't go through with it now. The joke—it's on me. I love her! She can't be married to a convict!"

"Right beautiful girl, ain't she, Dal?"

"Shut up, damn you! I—"

"You shut up now, younker! Listen to me!" Miles snapped. "I'm glad you didn't marry her that way . . . not *that way! Sabe?*"

"What—what do you mean?"

Miles grinned. "It'd have been no revenge on me, Dal! No. You see, she wouldn't have been marrying an escaped convict—or a wanted man!"

"What? Are you locoed, too?"

"No. Because you, as Dalton Marcasson, your old name, are officially dead! Died in that escape from prison. . . Yes dead. I tried to tell you how I came up to prison to see you.

"YOU remember how you escaped across the railway trestle? And the posseman behind the rock who didn't open fire on you?"

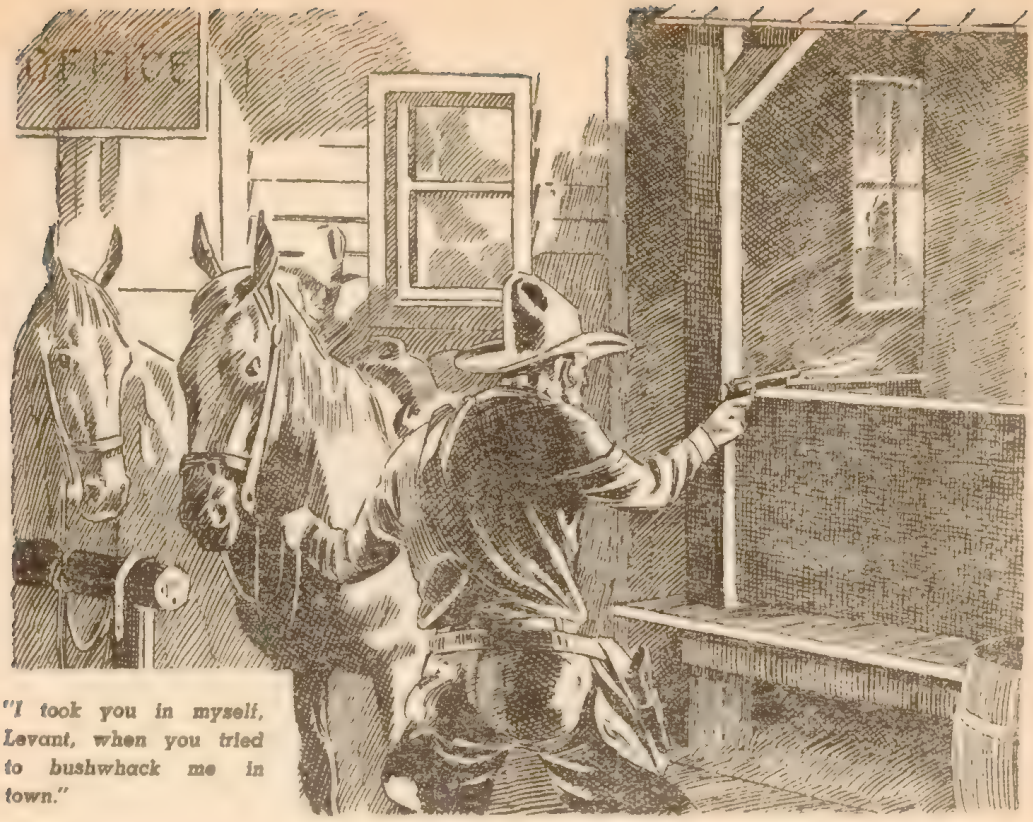
"Y-yes."

"I was that posseman, Dal. I didn't shoot you then—it was my way of trying to pay back for my mistake . . . Yes. When the rest of the posse came up, I lied. Told 'em you'd pitched from the trestle into the river below. Yep. That's why I turned in my badge afterward. After all, I'd betrayed the Law!. . . So you're dead and a free man! Nobody's ever going to know."

Slowly it slipped into Casson's tortured mind. He felt Beth in his arms. He hugged her tightly. Over her head he grinned at Miles Vergez.

Miles said, "Now take her out in the moonlight, Dal! But you gotta wait the weddin' till I can git up to give the bride away—but never the groom!"

THE END



"I took you in myself, Levant, when you tried to bushwhack me in town."

CONVICT'S CINCH

By Archie Joscelyn

(Author of "The Ghost Guns' Echo," "Gunpowder Ghost," etc.)

Wayne Phillips' cinch was in bad shape, and the cowboy was just about to fix it when the interruption came. But he was grateful later that he hadn't done that repair job!

IT LACKED full dusk, though the dark was creeping up out of the coulees and spreading across the earth, climbing the hills and hiding them away as it came. Wayne Phillips usually welcomed the dusk, but tonight, and here in these unfamiliar hills, it had an unfriendly, almost sinister quality to it. For punctuation, a twig cracked sharply, a little way off.

The cowboy had picked up his saddle and carried it to the firelight, while coffee bubbled in the pot over the fire. The cinch was getting weak and frayed, and needed attention. Now, however, he dropped the saddle, face setting in bleak lines, and stepped quickly away from the radius of the fire-glow, hand dropping to the butt of his revolver.

"Hombre," Wayne called distinctly. "Who you are or what you want, I don't know. But I know you're there, you've been hangin' around ever since I made camp, an hour back —sneakin' like a coyote beyond a hen-house. I don't like sneakin'. If

you want some grub, come an' get it, but show yourself—or I'll hunt you down and shoot you like I would any coyote."

He waited a moment, but there was no response. Wayne's dark face blackened a little more. He slipped deeper into the dusk, revolver at the ready. An hour, he figured, was more than long enough to be patient with any two-legged skulker, and he had no illusions on that score, since he'd seen the imprint of a big boot not long before. This fellow, whoever he was, had better show himself, or else—

For a quarter of an hour, using all his craft and stealth, Wayne kept up the hunt, but now the darkness was too thick. Disgusted, he returned to his camp. Of one thing he was convinced: this skulker, whoever he was, had no horse. So, if he wanted this camp site, he could have it. For himself, Wayne decided, he'd pull on a few miles.

He poured a cup of black, steaming coffee, drank it wryly. He'd left it to boil pretty long, and it had a kick like a mule—and a taste like the mule's hoof. It—

His head was swimming, the night seemed suddenly doubly dark. Wayne tried to clutch at a convenient sapling, missed, and realized that he was tumbling. The darkness closed over him, thick and complete.

SUNLIGHT in his face wakened him Wayne sat up woozily, conscious of a dreg-like taste in his mouth and a pounding head. For a moment, head between his knees, he sat there and tried to think, becoming aware that he was stiff and cold. Then gradually he remembered. That mysterious prowler about the camp, his ineffectual hunt for him, that drink of coffee—

His eyes widened in staring amazement as he looked down at his legs. Then he looked at the rest of himself in stark bewilderment. This was a Rip Van Winkle sort of awakening. He'd gone to sleep as a cowboy, dressed in regulation range garb from head to foot. Now he was a nightmare of stripes—black and gray stripes, the garb of a convict, as well as the rough, coarse cloth which a convict wears.

Head clearing a little, Wayne looked around. This was the same spot where he'd made camp the night before, all right, and there were the dead ashes of his camp fire. But nothing else was as it had been. The saddle, on which he had been about to do some work, was gone. So was his horse, his pack, the coffee-pot, supplies—everything. Understanding came bitterly.

"That sneakin' hombre of a two-legged coyote fooled around till I got mad enough to try and find him, then snuck in and drugged my coffee," he summarized. "He must've had some knock-out drops. And then he traded clothes with me, took my outfit, and lit out."

The thing was clear enough now. The fugitive convict had seen him ride this way and make camp, of course; the man wanted a change of clothes and an outfit pretty badly. Naturally, he hadn't dared show himself, and probably he had been unarmed. But he had managed to work the thing pretty smoothly, Wayne conceded grudgingly.

And by now, of course, armed and mounted, well supplied, the outlaw would be a long way from here. Shaking his head with distaste as he surveyed his own garb, Wayne walked across to a small creek, drank deeply, and felt a little better, though his temper was steadily mounting as he considered his predicament.

HE'D been heading for the Judith country, coming from West in the Idaho panhandle, and cutting across country, deep in the Big Belts. There was a job waiting in the Judith, rather a special one, which wouldn't brook of too much delay. But this could slow him down plenty.

And meantime, when he found someone and secured help, he'd have to explain the how-come of being dressed in stripes, and how he'd been made such a fool of. The big cowboy's mouth twisted w r y l y; it wouldn't be pleasant. But it was wear these duds or nothing, and while un-

derwear might not be too immodest back in here, there was cold at night and mosquitoes by day to veto that notion, so he set off, trudging doggedly. If he could be lucky enough to find someone before too long, a chance prospector, say —

Luck, it appeared, was with him to that extent at least. He had been walking less than an hour when he rounded the shoulder of a small hill and discovered a horseman only a hundred yards ahead. The sheer unexpected luck of this, deep in these hills, elated him. But in another moment the horseman would be out of sight. Wayne opened his mouth to call, started to run.

The next instant his feet went out from under him and he found himself tumbling, not far, only to the bottom of a tiny coulee which high water had gashed there at some period in the past. It was completely covered over with tall grass and brush now, so that he hadn't seen it at all. Disgustedly, Wayne picked himself up, with the unpleasant knowledge that by now the horseman would probably be out of sight and sound.

"Lift 'em Levant—and high! I've got you covered!"

Wayne spun about, incredulous, to stare into the black muzzle of a big forty-five, leveled at him from only a dozen feet away. Behind it was the grim face of the horseman, still seated big and solid in his saddle, a sheriff's star catching the sunlight, on his soiled vest.

Wayne blinked, swallowed, then as the gun jerked significantly, he obeyed the command. Already, expertly keeping him covered, the sheriff was swinging down from the saddle, approaching.

"Climb out of that ditch, Levant," he ordered harshly. "And keep 'em lifted. I'd as soon kill you as bother with takin' you back to hang—sooner, for the matter of that."

Gun thrust against Wayne's back now, he was feeling him over for weapons. Wayne protested.

"Dog-gone it, sheriff, can't you see that you're makin' a mistake?" he demanded. "Just because I'm wearin' this outfit don't make me a convict. I'm a cowboy, Wayne Phillips, headin' for a job in the Judith. Last night, this Levant I suppose it was, snuck up to my camp and drugged my coffee, then traded clothes with me and stole my outfit. You can easy see, if you know who you're after, that I'm not him."

"Oh yeah?" The sheriff's tone was supercilious, ragged with anger. "Don't try to pull any such line on me, Levant. Remember, I took you in the first place, five years back when you tried to bushwack me in town, and you ain't changed so much in that time. I've trailed you here, and now I've got you. Besides, if you'd been a lost cow waddy, you'd have sung out for help, 'stead of divin' to get out of sight the second you saw me."

Wayne choked, between incredulity and disgust.

"But dog-gone it, sheriff, that's what I was tryin' to do—attract your attention," he protested. "Then I tumbled into this gully here without seenin' it—"

"Save your breath," the sheriff said wearily. "You're going right back to Deer Lodge — 'less they say to hang you first—and this time, with your record, and after killin' two guards when you escaped, you won't get off with a lifer's sentence. This time you'll hang all right."

He had jerked a length of rawhide thong from a pocket with one hand, while the other held the gun unwavering. Now he ordered Wayne to lower his hands, and quickly slipped the loop around his wrists, knotting it tightly.

"I've no handcuffs along, but this 'll serve," the sheriff said grimly. "I've an extra cayuse back here a little, and when we reach it, you can ride. Now march!"

"But listen, Sheriff," Wayne tried again. "I'm tellin' you the truth. While you're takin' me back, this Levant is gettin' clean away. If you'll come back a couple of miles, I can show you where my camp was, and the tracks of his horse, which was

mine, leadin' on, where he's ridin' it. That ought to be proof."

"I know your tricks too well, Levant, to give you a chance to try any of them," the sheriff warned harshly. "The first wrong move you make, I'll kill you. We're headin' back without any foolin', just like there won't be any fooling around about hanging you when we do get back."

Before that grim threat, Wayne walked ahead, beads of cold sweat breaking on his face as he began to realize the enormity of the situation which had overtaken him. It was just sheer bad luck, of course, that he and this killer-convict should look so much alike, but evidently they did, if the sheriff, who had captured Levant once before, was convinced that he was Levant.

Probably the convict, lurking in the dusk beyond his campfire the night before, had noticed the similarity and chuckled gleefully as he realized the full possibilities. Though it was working out better for him than he could hardly have dared to hope.

But if the sheriff was so sure—Wayne shivered. As the other horse loomed ahead, he asked a question.

"So you're turnin' me over to the warden at Deer Lodge when we get back, eh?"

"Climb into that saddle," the sheriff ordered. "You can make it! Nope, I likely won't turn you over to him. Mean an' extra hundred and fifty miles travelin' for me. I'll send them word, when I get you to my jail, but it's ten to one they'll save trouble and expense by orderin' me to finish the job of hangin' you, myself. Which it'll be a pleasure to do."

Wayne's last hope faded. Turning in the saddle, he took a long look at his captor. Now he knew him. That acquiline beak of an eagle's nose, the thin, ferocious mouth above a huge, scraggly mustache, and the yellow-green eyes of the man—this could be no other than Sheriff Puma Mortison, whose reputation as a man-hunter had traveled far beyond his own baliwick.

As a man-hunter, Puma left nothing to be desired. But as a sheriff, Wayne's opinion of him, even before this meeting, had been that he lacked a lot of necessary qualities, such as fair-mindedness and a desire to see justice, rather than the strict letter of the law, prevail. But it was Puma into whose clutches he had fallen—and if he was once taken into Puma's jail, the odds were a hundred to one that he would leave it by the rope route, to be buried in a felon's grave and under the name of Levant.

YET if he made a try at escape, the man was ready to shoot him down as he would kill a wolf. Now he was riding a length behind, and Wayne understood why his hands had been tied in front of him, rather than behind his back. This way, he was almost as helpless, but he could use his fingers to hold the reins and go where Puma ordered, which saved leading the cayuse, and kept Wayne in front of him. But if he tried to turn the cayuse or make a run for it, he wouldn't get three jumps.

What had been a humiliating and aggravating situation a little while before had become a desperate one now. Wayne considered, and made his decision. If he wanted to get away, this wild hill country was the only place for it. The chances were slim, but any chance at all was better than to be taken back and hung. Besides, if that happened, Levant would make good, not only his temporary, but his permanent escape. And he had something to settle with the outlaw.

The trail which they followed had narrowed. On one side a high hill crowded it, and on the other, far down below, crawled the same creek which had wound past his camp of the night before. Here it was bigger, deeper—turbulent rapids and deep pools fifty feet below, with more than a few jagged rocks like fangs snarling from the water. Not an inviting place for what he had to do, but probably this sort of country offered the best chance for any real try at escape.

Wayne slipped his feet from the

stirrups. This spot possessed one merit—once down off this trail, the sheriff would be delayed in following him. Though if he landed at the bottom with a broken leg or neck, minutes of delay wouldn't matter. But as between a broken neck here, or a cracked neck in a noose, he preferred to take this chance.

Swiftly, Wayne flung himself off his horse, out and down. He heard Puma's startled exclamation, a bullet whipped, just too late, where he had been, then he was tumbling through the whipping branches of an uprearing tree, into a cluster of brush. His clutching hands closed momentarily on a branch, clung, and it bent, held a moment, and broke with the strain, but it had checked his tumble. He struck with a jar, another ten feet down, and forty feet down the cliff-side from the trail above.

For a moment, on a narrow, mossy shelf of rock, he tried to stop, but the slippery moss let him keep sliding, then he was falling again—another dozen feet, through more overhanging willow branches, to plop into a pool of the creek.

But down here he was hidden from the sheriff's sight, and he'd made the descent of that cliff comparatively unhurt. His feet touched bottom, and he waded to shore, back under the overhang of branches, crouched there. The way the cliff looked, it would take minutes for the sheriff to find a way down, more minutes to pick any sort of a path along this rock-lined creek.

Already the water was having one good effect. Holding his wrists in the creek, Wayne worked at the rawhide, which was gradually stretching, loosening. Somewhere he heard the sheriff, working desperately but without much luck to get down. Then the thong gave a little more, and his wrists were free.

The shadow of a grin touched his tight lips as he stood up. Puma was frantic, and that over-eagerness was betraying him. He was working his way down the cliff, back some distance, but here was what looked like a passable way up. And if he could get back up, to the horses, while Puma was down below—

This time, luck was with him. Wayne selected the sheriff's own horse, and rode ahead, leading the other. Three or four miles farther on, he left the extra horse. He didn't want to set the sheriff completely afoot in this wilderness, and that lead should give him plenty of leeway. Then, grimly, Wayne kept on riding, heading in the direction that his own horse's trail had shown that Levant was heading that morning.

Luck had been with him in escaping the sheriff, but Wayne was under no illusions as to the job he had cut out for him now. His only chance to escape the relentless hounding of the law was to get the real Levant, and Puma would keep after him, not Levant. And to get a killer, who was armed and desperate, while he himself was unarmed, wasn't his idea of any picnic.

BUT it had to be done. At this sort of job, Wayne's experience stood him in good stead. He could follow a trail with the best of them, and by mid-afternoon he knew that he was gaining. He kept on until darkness made it impossible to follow, camped, and was on the trail again with daylight.

By mid-morning, the country was, if anything, wilder and more inaccessible than the point where he had made his escape from the sheriff the day before. But now this game of hide and seek was beginning to pay dividends. He was, Wayne could tell, a lot more at home in such country as this than was the outlaw. Levant had headed back in here because this sort of country offered him his only salvation, and he probably didn't dare believe that his luck would be so good that the law would hang Wayne in his place and forget about him.

Levant wasn't taking such a chance. But back in here he was pretty much bewildered, if not lost. Every now and again, as the sign indicated, he'd been forced to turn back from some blind canyon or im-

passable gorge and find a new trail. Most of these blind alleys, Wayne could sense in advance and avoid, and now, from a high point, he glimpsed the outlaw, half a mile away, saw him quest fruitlessly as he was balked, decide on a course, and start.

This time, the grin on Wayne's tight-set lips was real. Now he had him where he wanted him! He rode ahead, found the sort of place he wanted, dismounted, and crouched behind the shelter of a clump of brush, a little above the trail where Levant would presently be riding.

What he had to do now would be ticklish business, but he was counting heavily on the element of surprise. When Levant rode below, Wayne intended to pounce down on him like a puma dropping on a deer, to pull him from the saddle and make him a captive before the outlaw quite knew what was happening.

A miscalculation here would be serious, but the scheme seemed to offer the best chances of success. He tensed as Levant rode into sight, a hundred feet away, came unsuspectingly on. Now!

Once again, it was the whilom caprice of lady luck which intervened, this time against him. He had timed his own jump exactly, but some small rodent had lurked in a clump of grass on the path beneath, not far in advance of the approaching horse. As the cayuse's hoofs approached its hiding place, it darted out, right in front of the horse's nose, scurrying for other cover.

The startled cayuse reared back, and Wayne, instead of landing on top of Levant, landed in a sprawling heap on the trail just in front of him. He twisted, rolling desperately for cover, halted at the sharp rap of the outlaw's command, the glint of his own gun covering him now.

Disgustedly, in response to orders, Wayne got to his feet, stood while the outlaw searched him for weapons much as the sheriff had done, then looked around and discovered the sheriff's horse.

"How come?" he demanded curtly, and gestured with the gun.

Wayne told him.

"Puma thought I was you, and started to take me back. I got away—on his horse."

Studying the outlaw now, he wasn't surprised. There were points of dissimilarity, of course. The outlaw's face was somehow harder, more deadly, but they did look a lot alike, both in build and appearance. And even their voices were similar. A glint had crept into Levant's eyes now.

"So you fooled Puma, eh?" he said. "That's better luck than I'd hoped for—though I did notice that you looked plenty like me, when I made the trade."

He considered for a moment, eyes narrowed, and the light in them grew more unpleasant.

"But you took my trail, intendin' to take me back to that sort of a law dog—and you deserve killin' for that. Likewise, Puma'll be followin' on yore trail—and mine, now. But I found a right nice spot not far from here, and I think it'll turn the trick. Dispose of you, and do it in such a way that Puma'll find you and be plumb satisfied, too. Then I can go on without nothin' to worry about."

He gestured toward Wayne's horse.

"Get on," he said. "And ride where I tell you. And remember, if you try anything, I won't have any compunctions about killin' you. A few minutes one way or the other won't make much difference."

HELPLESS, Wayne obeyed, and they turned on the outlaw's backtrail now. This, Wayne reflected, was pretty much the same sort of a situation that he had been in just twenty-four hours before, each time with a gun at his back and a man who was over-eager for a chance to use it. Only this time, it wouldn't be a matter of two or three days before he was lodged in a jail before being taken out to die. Levant intended to kill him in a matter of minutes.

They rounded a turn in the hills, and not far ahead was a steep slope of a mountain. Across it was a barren strip of rock, reaching from near

the top clear to the bottom—shale-like stone, which had been doing more or less sliding for years. The strip of it was comparatively narrow—only about a hundred feet wide.

But to cross that hundred feet would be inviting disaster. The old trail which had crossed at the foot had been overlaid by the sliding shale, until now it was treacherous. And one look at the bunched-up, almost overhanging mass some distance above convinced Wayne that, as soon as a horse or a man on foot started out there, the shale underfoot would start sliding, releasing that up above. It was a hundred to one that, before he had gotten halfway across that narrow strip to safety, tons of the stuff would descend and overwhelm horse and man.

The sign showed him that Levant had come this far before, but had turned back, finding another route, not daring to chance it. Now his eyes glittered sardonically.

"*You're* going to ride out there, hombre," he said. "If by any chance you are lucky enough to get across, I've still got my gun—or should I say your gun? But I don't figure you'll make it. You'll wait here, and your sheriff's horse. Time he finds you, still in my old suit, he'll be plumb satisfied."

Keeping the gun steady with one hand, Levant was untying something from beside the saddle-horn, which Wayne had carried there—a long blacksnake. His eyes glittered.

"Just to make sure," he said. "I'll give your cayuse a cut with the whip. You're going to try that ride."

Wayne's jaw muscles tightened. There was no way out of it — not without being gunned down without a chance. There was, of course, the bare possibility that, lashed onward by terror and the driving whip, his horse could make it across that treacherous passage without being caught. But even if he did make it, then Levant would shoot him down

The Colors Run Red When

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by

RUSSELL GRAY

Look for it in the January 1945 issue of

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

as soon as he was across, before he could get out of gun-range.

Or that was the way the outlaw figured it. Not to give him any chance at all. Well—he might figure it so, but Wayne had a hunch of his own. The outlaw's attention was half-distracted for the moment with untying the blacksnake, and, keeping his own eyes unwavering on Levant's mocking gaze, Wayne's own fingers moved swiftly, unobtrusively, at something tied near his own saddle-horn. Since Levant knew that he was not armed, he wasn't watching him too closely for the moment.

Levant figured that he had an everlasting cinch in this situation—but it might be the sort of a cinch that he didn't calculate on. As the blacksnake came loose in Levant's fingers, so did the sheriff's lariat-rope come loose in Wayne's—and the cowboy had noted already that it was a supple rope, with noose ready built. His fingers sorted it out swiftly, expertly, his gaze still unwavering.

"Here's where you travel," Levant said, almost pleasantly, and raised the blacksnake — then brought it down in a long, savage slash across the rump of Wayne's cayuse.

Too late, engrossed with his own swing, the outlaw saw the lifting lariat rope in the cowboy's hand, tried to dodge—and had a momentary sense of relief as, without a twirl, the noose shot straight out—and missed him.

But as Wayne's cayuse, stung to frenzy and sudden terror by the bitter lash of the blacksnake, leaped forward along the trail of shale, Wayne took a swift turn of the rope about his own saddle-horn, noting with grim satisfaction that his throw had gone exactly where he had aimed it for—the noose had closed and jerked tight about the saddle-horn of the outlaw—the saddle which had been Wayne's for a long time.

THE frenzied jump of Wayne's horse ahead tightened the rope with a terrific jerk, and the next instant the thing which Wayne had counted on, was happening. That old saddle cinch, which he had been about to try mending before his own campfire when the outlaw sneaked up, parted with a snap. Saddle and man were jerked ahead through the air as if released from a catapault—to fall in a sprawling tangle, straight in the path of the shale.

Deliberately, Wayne let go of the rope end which he held, releasing the half-hitch about his own saddle-horn. His own horse couldn't be impeded by any such drag as that now, not and stand any chance of getting across that trail alive. Already, the thing which both men had figured as a certainty at this spot was happening—taking place swiftly.

The overhang of the long shale slope above was starting to slide down with a rush, releasing tons of the stuff. A welling scream rose up behind him, was smothered as quickly in the thundering tumult of the slide. Wayne's horse was running, scrambling frantically, urged on now by new terror, its feet slipping in the treacherous stuff underfoot, shale rattling and bounding all around it.

Leaning forward, striving by his own will to urge the cayuse to greater speed, Wayne held his breath. For straining seconds which stretched like hours it seemed as if they must be engulfed, overwhelmed, then, with the stuff thundering and rattling in a sweeping volley just behind, the horse gained firm footing beyond it.

The dust had settled when Wayne rode back. By some freak of the surging mass, he found the outlaw's boots, his own boots, sticking up, and it didn't take much digging to get him out. Changing clothes wasn't a pleasant job, and his old outfit was considerably the worse for the wear and tear of those fearful seconds.

He left the sheriff's horse standing in good feed, and slapped it affectionately for the speed it had shown when they both needed it most. Then, on his own horse again, he kept going. The sheriff would be satisfied with what he'd find here. For himself, there was still that job in the Judith country.

THE END

BRONC-BUSTING GOBBLER

By Joe Austell Small

(Author of "Me and the Devil," "Bulls Don't Wear Drawers," etc.)

Wherein a Tom Turkey cures a cowpoke's cayuse of the boogers!

THE little old F K Bar Ranch is located just off the fourteenth bobcat trail from the main clay road. It's wild and lonesome—a stretch of country where it looks like most anything can happen. And it generally does! Thick myrtle vines throw dark shadows over the creek beds, and big panthers walk midnight trails among the sumac. A man who eats three meals a day in this kind of terrain has got to be rugged! It's been said that some of these old back country cowboys are so tough they use a live porcupine to comb their hair.

The F K Bar is a little ranch. Just 2,362 acres. We call it the Floating Kidney for short. Our boss is pretty easy and we don't have much to worry about, only at times. And this account is about two of the times. . .

* * *

I've got a little dun horse that's so full of life it's always dribbling out the edges. He's broke to riding all right, but about twice a day he forgets about being broke. I eat a right smart of dirt on account of him forgetting like that.

Shag Holt, fo'man of the Road Runner spread, is over laying his eyes on our cavvy, trying to pick out a nag for his boss to ride. Seems the old man's mount has run an armidillo hole up his leg and has to be retired with the old man's Colt. Shag knows we've got some spirited hoss flesh and so he aims to pick out one for his boss.

The Road Runner fo'man has a hump in his back pocket on account of the dough he's toting around to pay for that nag. One look at it and I have to pry my eyes away. I need money now like desert sand needs water, so figure I'll sell him my dun bronc.

"I want a fast hoss," Shag allows. "One that's got some bottom to him and a cuttin' hoss besides. Don't want no rambunctious snort-hard neither."

"Mine's so dad-blamed fast," I tell Shag, "that you got to circle back around and pick up your head when he takes off. He's got more bottom than a loco-motive train and as for cuttin'—a man don't have to direct him—just sit on that hoss and think. Think which critter yuh want and where yuh want 'er. That hoss'll do the cuttin'!" I don't say nothing about that rambunctious part and Shag don't ask, so we just let 'er lie as she is.

The talking part don't seem to sell Shag a whole lot, but when he sees that hoss, the big fo'man peartens up a right smart.

"Reckon you wouldn't mind showin' me what he can do," Shag asks. "That dun looks just about like what I've got in mind."

"Hang onto your eyes!" I say to Shag as I drop a loop over the dun's ears. "They're gonna bulge out and crawl away from you when this little horse gets into action!"

"I'll be careful!" Shag grins.

Course I oughta known all along what would happen. The devil don't let up on a man long enough so that he can put over a little fizzer like that. I didn't think it was necessary

to tell Shag that the dun was booger-shy because I didn't see how the bronc could find a booger that close to home.

But he does.

I crawl on, my head full of the fast running, cutting and real hoss show-off I'm gonna put on for Shag, and then that blasted old dominicker runs out with a shuck on his tail. The boss' son is always into some foolishment. I reckon I've told him a thousand times to stay away from the corrals with his pranks, and he has pretty well until now. But the kid's sure picked a time to go back on his word!

That bronc of mine never saw a rooster diked out in no such get-up before, and he don't like the lay of things. That shuck rattles as it scrapes the ground, and the rooster lets out a frightened squawk about every third step.

WELL, it's no use talking! That nag's found a booger again. He buck jumps through the open corral gate, shies as the rooster tries to run through his legs, and then he falls apart. That hoss has six or eight different fits he can pull when a booger closes in on him, and now he tries them all at one time.

When he gets through shying, snorting, and trying to fall over hisself, the bronc bogs his head and starts bucking. I get mad about now and try to stay on him just for spite, but it's no use. I end up plowing through a mound of new fertilizer, using my nose as an opening wedge.

"Don't believe I can use him," Shag says, smiling. "Too playful!"

After a couple more months of work on this bronc, I just about give up ever de-boogering him. It's a mortal shame, too. There's not a thing wrong with the nag but his respect for boogers.

Seems like important things happen when you least expect them in a cowboy's life. And most times, in a way you'd never thought could happen!

For instance, if someone had told me that an old tom turkey could cure my hoss of the boogers, I'd laughed square in his face.

It's long about the shank of fall when I meet up with this turkey gobbler. I'm riding my eye-boogered bronc through the scrub sage. We call a hoss like that "eye-boogered" because there's scare in him all the time—he's just waiting for the boogers in his eyes to start moving!

I've got my 30-30 carbine tucked under an arm and the picture of a big turkey dinner in my eyes.

The Floating Kidney is good turkey country all right. It's rolling hills with scattering bunches of cedar and liveoak and brush-choked rambling canyons. I've been seeing plenty of turkeys every day for two weeks, but I've been too busy at other things to actually give much time to hunting one down. But things have slackened up a little lately, and I aim to try my hand at gathering in some meat.

It's way up in the morning before I see a single tail feather and then it's one of those old hermit gobblers that had rather lone-wolf it than herd with a bunch. They're wild and smart as a brush bull. But I'm looking for meat. I take in after him.

By the time I am topping one ridge, he has located me and is topping another.

That old tom is easing off through a catclaw thicket, his long neck stretched and his blue head shining in the sun, when I reach the top of the next rise. Thinking maybe I can plant a bullet where his wings hinge, even at this distance, I hop down out of the saddle and throw up my gun.

But I don't figure on the eye-boogered dun. Bringing up my gun so sudden scares that hoss and he falls apart. By the time I can quiet him by a few kicks in the belly, my gobbler's clean out of sight.

It sort of riles me to hunt all the morning and then lose a good shot like that. I bog my spurs and lift that dun across the low places so fast his feet hit the ground only here and there.

If that gobbler gets away now, I'm gonna sure 'nuf be disappointed.

Most times in turkey hunting if you don't take advantage of that first chance, you don't get another!

BUT I haven't lost that fool gobbler yet. It's fairly open country here, and I spot him legging it up the next rise. It's a right decent shot, but now I've got this dun going good and he won't stop. The locoed son-of-a-gun is running blind like they do sometimes. He splits a liveoak thicket wide open, me just barely with him when we get through.

All this racket boogers the old gobbler and he takes to wing, gliding off across the country, just barely missing the brush tops.

Since I can't hold this fool dun, the next best thing I figure is to let him run. So when I slack off on the hackamore rope, he mortally starts fighting the ground with his feet. I manage to slap his head with my hat enough to keep him in the open and headed in the direction that gobbler went.

I smile excited like when I notice that we ain't too far behind that old cranberry basket when he hits the ground and this dun's closing the gap fast. In six seconds flat we've crowded the old boy into the air again.

Now this old turk is full of acorns, and he's plenty big and heavy. It's right hard for a bird in his condition to cut much of a figure when it comes to flying. When he lifts the third time, it is for only two hundred yards. After that he don't try to fly any more. It's just plain out running and that race is getting interesting.

Right now this nag of mine is showing his bottom. He can run any hoss in the county off his feet and never hardly breathe hard. I wish Stag Holt could see him now.

You'd be surprised just how fast and far one of these old hill gobblers can run. That dun's laboring a little now I can tell, but the old turk's still going strong. We've gained though until I can see his long sprout of beard dancing up and down and to the side as the old gobbler runs, darts, and flaps his wings for a little more go-juice.

Scabbarding my 30-30, I take down my lass rope and bathe the dun's tail with the double of it. It encourages that hoss a heap, and before you could smell a medium done steak, we're right up in throwing distance of that laboring old gobbler.

Wal, I take a cut at his long neck with my doubled-up rope, and it lays him over.

That dun's blowing so hard by now that he don't even snort when I throw the gobbler across his withers and tie the critter's head down to the saddle.

"This is one time you got about all of it you wanted!" I say to the dun. Then I fork leather, and we head for home.

That dun ain't hunting boogers now for the first time in his life. I've run a lot of foolishment out of him. It seems like everything in the world is all right now. That turkey dinner tomorrow is going to be a thing to delight the soul! The boys have been talking for a long time now. They've even put up a prize for the first one. I smile as I think of the ten bucks I'm gonna get. If it hadn't been for that, blamed if I know how I'd ever bought Donna a birthday gift. Donna, that's my girl.

BUT a cowpoke's peace of mind is generally pretty short lived. I'm jogging along with my mind on sweet white meat and dressing and that ten bucks when this old gobbler comes alive with a startled squawk and climbs all over me and that dun.

Even though that turk's head is tied to the saddle, he's got a long neck and too, his head's not tied close up. So he sort of backs up right in my face and whups me with them big wings till I can't get my breath. His feet and claws are busy too, and I expect that I'm getting clawed up a right smart.

I have that bronc figured to be run off his feet but I'm wrong. He falls back on his haunches, snorts like he'd just seen the devil crook a finger at him, and heads for the top of a liveoak, uncoupling hisself on the way up.

Now I'm supposed to be a pretty

good bronc buster, but I'm up against a rough row of cockle-burrs what with that gobbler spurring me in the face, whupping me over the head with his wings, and that hoss erupting on me all at the same time.

I don't rightly know how it happens, but in another shake of a red bug's eyelash I'm draped across a liveoak limb, limp as a bee-stung darky, and smelling of my toes.

I've just barely got enough energy left to lift my head and see what that bronc and gobbler are doing. It's plenty! They're topping the first ridge. That hoss is putting all he's got into it, and the old gobbler's in the saddle, raking and whupping him to a fare-you-well.

But I'm happy inside.

By the time that gobbler plays out, he'll have the bronc run off his feet. The hoss is traveling about as much up and down, in and out, over and under, as he is forward! He may not take the short cuts, but he's headed for home. We'll have turkey and dressing next day for dinner, and I'll bet six bits to a dried up prickly pear that my dun hoss has learned a booger lesson. He'll be a good, steady riding hoss from now on. It takes things like that to get the cranky bugs outta some hosses. Same way with some men.

I untangle myself from the tree and start walking. I'm scratched up a good bit, but I'm smiling.

Maybe it's a good thing I didn't sell that hoss to Shag Holt. If he gets the boogers worked out of him, that nag'll be worth twice what I would have priced him at to Shag. With a hoss like that a man might even tie onto a little spread some day, throw a tight half hitch on Donna and sort of settle down.

Funny how a poke's mind will work out when he's walking home at a time like that.

And it's all on account of that old hermit gobbler.

THE END

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No, you can't be there at the dressing station to give him a mother's blessing—a mother's care. All you can do is be thankful that the Army and the Red Cross take such good care of our boys. Yes, and you can see to it that such precious supplies as blood plasma, food and ammunition, and all the thousands of weapons of invasion reach the front in prime condition — ready to do their job.

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TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of the West

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By Kenneth P. Wood

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(Continued On Page 88)

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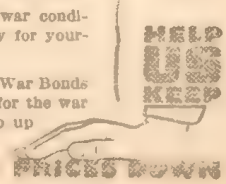

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(Continued From Page 85)

Then came a second stampede of ruffians, desperadoes, and parasites. The metal-producing country became a country of lynchings, barking .45's and sudden death; a country of saloons, gambling houses, and brothels, of street fighting and claim-jumping, a country of Americans, foreigners, Indians, Mexicans and Chinese.

In this setting arose also the stores, hotels, express offices, and all the necessary concomitants of mining life. But these camps, really only "villes" were frequently called "cities." They sprang from nowhere like an analogous growth to a simultaneous planting, their size and lasting qualities depending solely upon the permanence and richness of the ore in the surrounding hills. In California as early as 1850 some of these towns became county seats, and some are prosperous to this day. Among the flourishing ones are Auburn, Jackson, and Sonora, while Mariposa and Quincy still hold their own, and Shasta and Downieville are only mere shadows of their former greatness.

The frenzied gold rush culminated in the year 1852, after which the hastily built towns became deserted by the miners and tradespeople, and even as early as the '60's, towns which were once a great power in the State, both commercially and politically, commenced to fall into decay. Now mute and gaunt, this collection of villes scattered throughout the arid regions of the West is one of the most interesting phases of the old frontier.

Today many of these ghost cities are coming to life again for the high price of gold and the inexpensive methods of treating low grade ores makes it profitable for the veriest tenderfoot to work over the abandoned dumps. New companies are being formed. The tall mining shafts which had collapsed are now being erected. The immense drums which have toppled and fallen, still wound about with steel cables are being overhauled. Everything reflects progress and prosperity, while just beyond are the ancient miners' shacks and broken board sidewalks of an earlier boom. "Desert rats" and pock-

et miners again wander over the hills, looking for crumbs of the precious yellow metal in ground a thousand times scraped and scoured.

CALIFORNIA has no parallel in ghost towns for it was the original bonanza country. Angels Camp, for example, is one of these spectral towns still sheltering a handful of the descendants of the Forty-Niners who are basking in the glorious sunlight of another era, and who are ever reluctant to leave their old home in the hills. Bodie, some eighteen miles north of Lake Mono and close to the Nevada border is another. Fifty or more years ago Bodie was as "wild and woolly" as the rest, with a population of some ten thousand souls. Today it has hardly a dozen inhabitants. Gold was plentiful then, but when the mines shut down, there was no longer any reason for the miners to remain in Bodie, so they located elsewhere. Anyone visiting the old site can still see the rickety boardwalks, hotels, stores, and the false-fronted saloons, all in a state of disintegration, resembling for the most part a forgotten movie "set."

Not so far from Bodie across the State line is the once roaring mining center of Aurora, moldering and desolate, almost forgotten, while nearby Ryolite, an ancient and honorable camp of some thirty years' history that sprang up during a more recent boom has again come to life with the arrival of new workers in the community. Bullfrog, Goldfield, and Tonapah of Nevada fame are working overtime pouring forth molten metal in an endless stream. The old boom towns are booming again.

Many of the old camps of Colorado did not escape the fate of joining the long list of phantoms. Nevadaville, for instance, still stands atop its once productive hill, sentinel-like and alone, its buildings falling into ruin from sheer neglect. So far the new boom has not reached Nevadaville and but for the occasional curious tourist or prospector who comes to gaze upon the trees, vines, and weeds that so kindly hide its former splendor, there are no res-

(Continued On Page 90)

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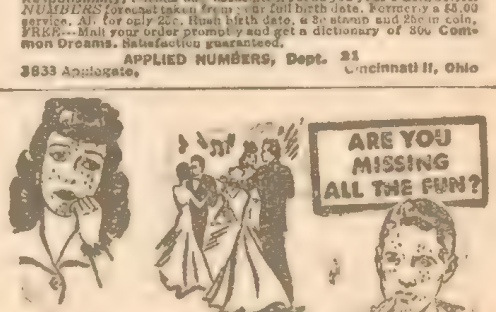

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(Continued From Page 89)

idents in this once famous settlement. In the same locality are many other historic camps which have yet to be revived—Lulu, Vulcan, Pearl, American City—all still rotting under the alkali-whitened dust from the desert and the withering hand of the scorching sun.

The names of these ghost towns are legion, and as varied as the fanciful whims of the early miners. From the more or less dignified ones, they descend into such curious names as Dry Town, Tin Cup, Hornitos, Double Springs, Rich Gulch, Mokelumne Hill, Gold Run; and thence into the humorous as Rough and Ready, You Bet, Rawhide, String Town, Red Dog, Yankee Jim's, Grasshopper Creek, Fiddletown; and last but not least, the unsavory names as Stinkingwater, Rattlesnake, Lousy Level, Poverty Bar, Whisky Bay, Poker Flat, Gough Eye, and Hell's Delight.

Montana, too, has its specters, and while many of them are just now in the throes of rejuvenation, conditions are not quite so chaotic as they were in the days when it was virgin territory. In those days the mining towns were wide open and every other house was a gambling den, or a saloon with a gaming room adjoining. All night and all day long the rattle of the roulette wheel was heard, and the raucous whoops of the excited craps players floated out through the swinging doors. Poker, as always, occupied the most important place among the games of chance.

MILLIONS came and went, fortunes were made and lost, men starved and then feasted again to a luxuriant death for the whole world seemed to swim and splash in a vast wash of glittering gold. The men who saw these things were some of them rich and well-fed, and some of them poor and half-starved. For what had come quickly by the lucky turn of a pick went just as quickly by the unlucky turn of a card. But no longer are such royal battles waged across the green baize as when the newly fledged mining millionaires met with money to burn and

with plenty of sporting spirit to burn it.

It was at the famous Silver Bow Club, in Helena, where they used to play big poker. At the game one night sat several gold magnates—Marcus Daly, Senator Hearst and J. B. Haggin, when there burst in a radiant New York drummer, who had a two weeks' card to the institution. He marched up to the players and politely asked if he might take a hand.

"Why, yes—come right in," said Daly.

With some ostentation the drummer spread a hundred dollar note on the table. "Let me have chips for that," he said gravely.

He went to hang up his coat and hat. When he returned the bill still lay on the table.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" the traveling man haughtily asked. "Ain't my money good?"

"Why, yes, to be sure," replied Daly. "Hearst, give the gentleman one white chip."

At the present time the metal-producing region is being invaded by a new crop of fortune-seekers who are hunting that precious yellow ore which under the new boom has been enhanced by government backing. And in spite of the great quantities already wrested from the hills some recent Argonauts are reported to have made lucky strikes. There is another kind of boom in the hardware business in the placer districts, for men and boys are buying supplies and striking out for the hills.

However, the majority of the old mining settlements will never return to their former glory—too much gold has been taken out, too much vitality has been burned out. But there are still countless alluvial deposits among the mountains waiting to be discovered by some fortunate prospector, and best of all there is still untold wealth in baser metals to be mined which just now is more important to America.

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The setup on Jim Hannigan's suicide was convincing enough, only . . .

HARD KNUCKLES pounding on his door brought old Fred Boyd out of a sound sleep. The oldster awoke slowly. The knuckles sounded again, only louder. Fred Boyd finally got awake.

"Hol'd yore horses!" he said loudly.

"Who's there?"

"Sheriff Wiggins. Your ol' friend, Jim Hannigan, has just killed himself."

Fred Boyd could hardly believe his ears. He took the bolt from the door and the lawman, accompanied by Mike Johns, entered.

"We ain't got much time," said the sheriff. "We jus' thought maybe you'd like to ride out to the ranch while me an' the coroner look at the remains." He rubbed his thick nose with his flat thumb. "Wonder why ol' Jim kilt himself?"

"Who found his body an' brought word to town?"

"Johns, here." The sheriff took his thumb from his nose and jabbed it in the direction of Mike Johns. "Tell him about it, Johns."

Fred Boyd dressed hurriedly while Mike Johns told him how he had gone out to the ranch after a day in town, and how he had found old Jim Hannigan dead in his bed, shot through his head. Mike Johns was a heavy-set, plump man of about twenty-six, and his fat cheeks quivered as he talked. He kept moistening his lips with his tongue as he talked.

"It's terrible," he said.

The sheriff rubbed his nose. "We better get on our way."

They rode under the stars. The road to the ranch was a gray ribbon twisting through the sagebrush. They pushed their horses hard and old Fred Boyd rode high on his stirrups.

Mike Johns' story had been simple. He had been running the roundup wagon over on the Stray River. They needed supplies, so he had ridden into town. After buying the supplies and contracting for their delivery, he had ridden to the ranch to see how old Jim Hannigan was getting along. Hannigan had had a touch of rheumatism and hadn't gone on roundup.

Fred Boyd looked at Johns, now. He was a heavy man, this Johns. A good-natured man, pleasant spoken, cordial, always smiling. Fred Boyd wondered why Jim Hannigan would kill himself. Although Hannigan suffered bad from his rheumatism, he was of a philosophical nature. Boyd thought it out of order that he take his own life; decidedly so.

"Where were you last evenin'?" asked the sheriff.

Fred Boyd bristled. "Down at the Kitty Wampus playin' cards with Joe Hawkins an' Hank Wells an' Bill Woods. Johns saw me in there. I went home about midnight; I was jus' gettin' to sleep when you knocked."

The sheriff scratched his nose. "Hang onto yourself, Boyd. I jus' asked a question, that's all." He looked at Mike Johns. "So you saw him in the Kitty Wampus, huh?"

"Got a drink in there," said Mike Johns. "That musta been about ten thirty, I guess. I went to the ranch from there an' found Hannigan dead so I rode right back for you."

"Was Jim Hanigan at the ranch by himself?" asked Fred Boyd.

Mike Johns shook his plump head. "No, ol' man Rowena was there, too.

He was awake in the bunkhouse. He was awake when Hannigan killed himself."

"Wonder if he heard the shot?" asked the sheriff.

Again Mike Johns hangdog jowels shook. "No, he didn't."

Fred Boyd gave all this deep thought. He was certain of one thing: Jim Hannigan had not killed himself. Or had he? After all, he hadn't seen Jim for almost six months, and he had heard Hannigan was suffering bad from his rheumatism, and maybe the pain had gotten too much.

Jim Hannigan and Fred Boyd had come up the Powder river trail, some thirty years before, and started the Y Down outfit. Their partnership had been poorly selected and they had never got along very well; but they had clung to it until about six months before, when Fred Boyd had sold out to Mike Johns.

Mike Johns had answered the ad Fred Boyd had run in the Stockman's Journal. He was no cowman, he admitted, but he had some money to invest. He had swung into line and got to be a rather good man; he was shrewd and kind-hearted, and everybody liked him.

THE coroner, a thin man, had already arrived at the ranch. He and the old handyman, Henry Rowena, were in the bedroom when the three entered. Fred Boyd and Mike Johns stood at the foot of the bed.

The sheriff stood and rubbed his nose and looked at the corpse. Old Jim Hannigan didn't have much of a head left. Mike Johns said, "Good Lord, what made him do it?" and his hands shook as he gripped the bedstead. Old Jim Hannigan was a mess, and he was plenty dead.

The sheriff took the gun from Hannigan's dead, curled fingers. He broke it open, and five good shells and a fired jacket fell out. The gun was a Colt's .45. He handed it to Fred Boyd.

"That's his gun, ain't it?"

Boyd nodded.

The sheriff knelt beside the corpse. He minutely studied the smashed

(Continued On Page 95)

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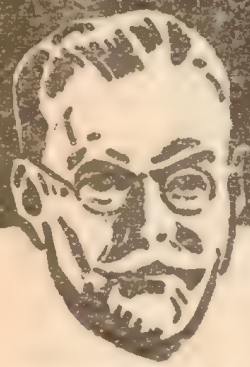

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(Continued From Page 93)

head. "Powdermarks in the skin," he said. He got to his feet. "What do you say, coroner?"

"Suicide."

"I guess so," said the lawman. "Now why would he kill himself? That don't seem like ol' Jim, but a man can never tell bout another man, can he?"

"I guess not," said Mike Johns.

Fred Boyd was wondering who would get the ranch—or Jim Hannigan's half of it—now that Hannigan was dead. "I wonder if he left a will?"

"He didn't," said Mike Johns. "He was talkin' about it the other day, too. Has he got any close kin, Boyd? You know more about him than I do."

"Not a soul," said Fred Boyd. "You'll inherit it, being as you're his partner, an' closest associate." There was a silence. "You never did get to know ol' Jim very well, did you?"

"Not as well as I wanted," said Mike Johns. "I had to manage the ranch by myself, seeing he was so crippled up. No, I didn't get to know much bout him."

"I can see that," said Fred Boyd.

"What do you mean?"

The sheriff said, "Let's get out of here an' go into the front room. Maybe there's a bottle in the cupboard."

"Wait a minute," said Fred Boyd.

The sheriff halted. "What's the matter?"

"This isn't a suicide. This is murder!"

THEY stopped, and stared. The sheriff rubbed his nose thoughtfully. The coroner glanced at the corpse. Mike Johns stood and looked at Fred Boyd, his babyish face slightly pale.

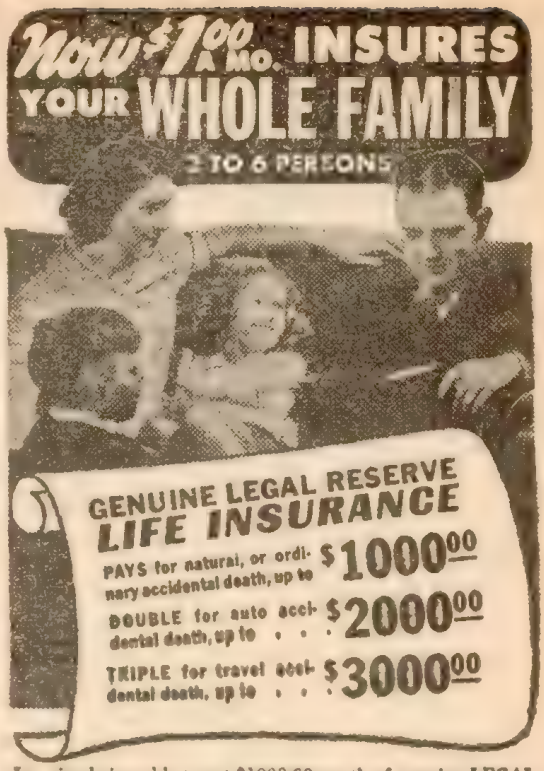
"Explain yourself," said the sheriff.

"Ol' Jim Hannigan's been in bed. The murderer came in that open window, put his gun up to ol' Jim's head an' let the hammer drop."

The sheriff studied him. "Why didn't Rowena, here, hear the shot?"

"I dunno. But if you'll notice, Hannigan has been shot from the right side."

(Continued On Page 96)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"But you didn't know about his rheumatism," said Fred Boyd. "You see, when he had a severe rheumatism attack, his right arm got paralyzed, an' he couldn't use it. So he couldn't shoot himself with his right hand."

"I'd forgot that," said the sheriff. "You told me that once, too, a few years back."

"You must be wrong," said Mike Johns. "Why, who would kill him, Boyd? He had no enemies that I know about."

The sheriff rubbed his nose. "You must be wrong, Boyd."

Fred Boyd shook his head stubbornly. "No, I ain't, sheriff. Another thing is, Jim Hannigan's got his head —or what's left of it—layin' on a pillow. Jim's ridden roundup for years an' slept on the ground; he never would use a pillow. Who ever killed him put that pillow under his head to make it look more convincing. Rowena, you used to make Hannigan's bed, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I used to leave the pillows, but he would never use them."

The sheriff moved Hannigan's head gingerly. He lifted the pillow. There was blood under it. That blood had not seeped through; it had been there before the pillow was slipped under the dead man's head.

"You're right, Boyd," he said. "Now who would kill him, an' why?"

"Who would profit by Hannigan's death?" asked Fred Boyd.

"Why—" The sheriff looked at Mike Johns.

"Are you insinuating that I killed him?" Mike Johns' blue eyes were wide.

FRED BOYD spoke. "You've been the only one at the ranch. Both you an' Rowena say that. You've tied your horse in the brush, then you've come ahead on foot. You climbed in the window an' shot Hannigan while he slept. You didn't know about his paralyzed arm an' that he never uses a pillow."

"Can you prove that?"

"I've done a little investigatin' of my own, Johns. If you hadn't stepped in, me an' Jim Hannigan'd gone back together as partners. I wondered what kind of a man Hannigan had hooked up with, so I looked up your back trail. You shot a man back East—"

Mike Johns had a gun out now.

"You're plenty smart," he said. "Too smart. Yes, I killed him. I'd a put it over, too, if it hadn't been for you. You'll never take me into court either for this or that affair back East—"

His hammer fell. The bullet hit Fred Boyd in the left arm. Boyd reached for his gun. Mike Johns cocked his gun again, but he never got to fire. The sheriff shot three times, rapidly.

"You hurt bad, Boyd?"

"Busted my arm, I think." The sheriff and Rowena ripped a sheet to pieces and tied the arm. "That'll do until we make town. Is he dead, coroner?"

"He's dead."

"Two things have me puzzled," said the sheriff. "There was one bullet fired in Hannigan's gun. If Johns had shot the gun once to make it look like suicide, why didn't Rowena hear the report? Or did Hannigan let his hammer ride on a fired cartridge?" He handed the bullets from Hannigan's gun to Fred Boyd.

"Reckon Rowena's gettin' deaf. Hannigan's gun never fired this. The firin' pin hit the cap off-center. Hannigan's would have hit it in the middle. I know. I made a new hammer for it right before I left. Johns put that fired cartridge into Hannigan's gun."

The sheriff nodded. "What did you find out about Mike Johns' past?"

"He'd shot a man back East. Never killed him, but when Johns left that section, ahead of the law, he didn't know whether the man would live or not. The gent he shot was travelin' with a stock company—"

"Yes, Mike Johns was an actor."

"So that explains that baby-like pose. Damn, an' those baby-blue eyes really got me, too. Well, he was a good actor, too. But not good enough."

The sheriff scratched his nose and smiled crookedly.

BUSHWHACKER'S PARADISE

By Lee Floren

(Author of "No Range For An Outcast," "The Boothill Buckaroo," etc.)

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe had to avenge the murder of a man who might not be dead—yet!

BUCK McKEE met the stranger on the rimrock above Dawson town. They reined in "That's an off-trail brand on that black of yourn," he said. "B Bar B . . . Where all is that iron located?"

and eyed each other suspiciously as they rolled cigarets. The stranger's right hand rested menacingly on his holstered .45. Plainly he was looking for trouble.

"Wyomin'," murmured Buck. He studied the big man over his cigaret smoke, tense and ready inside. "Why ask, stranger?"

"Jus' curious." The stranger licked his cigaret and leaned forward on his stirrups, his eyes narrowed. "Got an extra match?"

"Sure," murmured Buck. "Anythin' to oblige." He dug into his levi pocket with his left hand. The stranger moved his bronc in close and started to pull his right-hand gun!

The man was quick; Buck knew he could not draw his own gun in time. He leaned forward, feet anchored in oxbow stirrups, and grabbed the man's arm, holding it so the gun pointed downwards.

They fought silently; brute strength against brute strength. Buck's fingers were steel-clamps tearing into the man's muscles. The man cursed and reached for his other gun.

He let go of his reins and his terrified sorrel jumped aside. Buck pulled him from saddle. They crashed to the ground.

Buck landed on the bottom. Sharp gravel and pebbles ground through his shirt and scratched his back. He clung to the man's arm, tried to pull one of his own guns.

The stocky man's other hand smashed into Buck's face. Buck's nose was bleeding. The man's hot breath was heavy with the stench of rotgut whiskey; anger glittered in his narrowed eyes. He pulled the gun around slowly.

Buck kicked him in the belly and the gent grunted loudly. His hold relaxed slightly; he let his gunhammer fall. The bullet beat into the gravel and showered Buck's face with pebbles. But now, Buck had his own Colt out.

He jammed it against the man's ribs. He let the hammer drop twice.

The man stiffened as if he had been slugged with a ten-pound sledge. He dropped his gun and then fell forward.

Buck pushed him to one side, and got to his feet. The stranger was dead, but Buck had little thought for the dead man.

He thoughtfully wiped the blood from his nose and studied the big hilly valley that sprawled below him. Buckrush covered hills converged down on alkali flats and, situated on one of these white splotches, was the dingy town of Dawson, some five miles distant.

This dead gent, Buck figured, had tried to keep him from riding into Dawson. And that fact told Buck one thing: the end of his trail was near.

The dead man had been interested —too interested—in the brand on Buck's black, and young Tip Ames' bronc had had the same B Bar B iron. The stranger had recognized that brand and deliberately picked a fight.

A MONTH ago, Tip Ames and nine thousand dollars had left Wyoming, headed north to buy some registered bulls. But neither Tip—nor the bulls—had returned. John Ames, Tip's dad, had asked Buck and his partner, the Mexican Tortilla Joe, to trail Tip, and solve the riddle.

Anticipating trouble, Buck and Tortilla had split up, taking separate trails into Dawson. They had figured they would be able to work better independently; even now, fat Tortilla should be in Dawson. .

Thirty minutes later, Buck rode down Dawson's main street, leading the horse that toted the dead man. He rode into the town livery barn and dismounted.

"Grain my black plenty," he told the runty hostler. "Go heavy on the bluejoint hay—"

The oldster stared at the dead man. "That—that's Madigan— You—you kill him, stranger?"

Buck nodded.

"Why—hell, I'd hate to be in your boots. Fat Mike fin' this out—there'll be hell to pay—"

"Who's Fat Mike?"

"He's Madigan's boss." The oldster rubbed his rheumy eyes. "Man, he was standin' in front of his store

"He's right handed," said the sheriff. "I knew him that well."
when you rode up the street!"

"This him comin' now?"

"Yep."

The oldster suddenly busied himself with his manure fork in a stall. Fat Mike rolled into the barn, an enormous man who walked with heavy tread, his short arms pushed outward by his bulging sides. His baggy blue suit hung limply around his ponderous form. His thick lips mouthed a black cigar.

His companion was a lanky, spidery man. Two heavy gunbelts, freighted with cartridges, crossed his flat waist. His big Adam's apple bobbed like a fishing-cork as he methodically chewed tobacco.

The dead man lay face-down, and Fat Mike lifted his head by his hair. His eyes expressionless, he gazed down emotionlessly. Then he let the limp head drop. His gaze, sharp as a razor, took in Buck.

He didn't remove his cigar; he spoke around it. "You kill Madigan?"

Buck nodded. "He jumped me on the rimrock."

Fat Mike rolled his cigar. "You're a stranger here, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Madigan never knowed you from some other locality, did he?"

"Nope."

"Then why would he jump you, mister? He never had no grudge against you."

"He didn't like the brand on my horse," murmured Buck.

Fat Mike read aloud. "B Bar B. Out-of-state brand. . . Now why would Madigan—"

Buck interrupted quietly with, "Madigan used to work for you, fella?"

"He did. Why?"

"Then," said Buck slowly, "Why ask me such a question?"

Fat Mike's eyes were probing knives. "I don't follow you, stranger."

"You sure you don't?"

Fat Mike spat on the manure pile. But, still, he did not remove his cigar. "What's your deal, fella?"

(Continued On Page 100)

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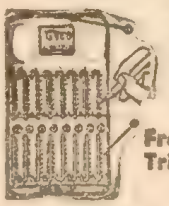

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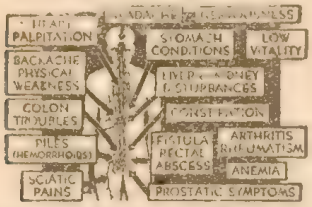

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(Continued From Page 99)

Buck was just playing a hunch. Maybe he was barking up the right cottonwood; maybe he wasn't.

"Forget it," he murmured.

He turned to unsaddle his leg-weary black. The spidery man grabbed him by the shoulder with steely fingers. When Buck turned his hands were on his guns. The thin man spoke jerkily.

"Madigan was my friend. I'm takin' up with you where he left off—"

HE SAID no more. Fat Mike's big hand saw to that. Without moving, the obese man had reached out, clamped a hard hand around the man's mouth, and jerked him backwards. The effort was easy. There was, Buck saw, unlimited strength to this fat man.

"Jeffers, you've been drinkin' a little too much." Fat Mike spoke then to Buck McKee. "May your stay in Dawson be a pleasant one." Then he lifted his eyes to the hostler. "Two of my men will take care of Madigan's body later on."

He wheeled his massive bulk then, and walked outside, with Jeffers following. And, at the door, they met Tortilla Joe.

The heavy Mexican lurched into Jeffers, then stepped back and regarded him in make-believe drunkenness. "You are Senor Fat Mike, no? Me, I am Tortilla Joe. I hear you want to hire man fast with hees gun—" Tortilla Joe's big .45 leaped into his hand.

Jeffers backed up. "Be careful with that pistol, fella!"

"I'm the fella you're lookin' for," said Fat Mike. His sunken eyes were bright under their rolls of fat. "Maybe we can talk somethin' over. Come along."

Tortilla Joe swaggered away with them. Buck knew a number of things: Tortilla Joe had reached Dawson ahead of him, had seen him ride into town. Then he had started for the livery to see Buck. He'd heard Buck's conversation with Fat Mike and Jeffers, and joined up with Fat Mike for what he could learn. Which was all right. . .

The hostler smiled. "That Mex

must be a newcomer," he said. "Ain't seen him aroun' before. Well, Fat Mike can use his gun savvy. You see him jerk that cutter of his'n? Fast as a quarter hoss."

Buck studied the horses in the stalls. He couldn't see Tortilla Joe's cayuse. The Mex must have hidden his bronc out in the brush. Didn't want anybody to know that he and Buck both rode B Bar B brands. Buck took a bottle from one of his saddlebags.

"Drink, fella?"

"Don't care if I do." The hostler studied the brand on Buck's horse. "You from Wyomin', too?"

"How'd you know?"

The hostler drank deeply. "That t'other fella was from Wyomin', an' he straddled a B Bar B bronc. That was quite a while ago. But he drank too much an' he ran into some trouble; he got killed."

Buck made his voice show disinterest. "Yeah, an' who killed him? An' why?"

"He was down to the Milestone. He got purty drunk an' started talkin' about how much money he had. Well, he goes out the back-door. We hears some shootin' out there an' Jeffers—he was deputy sheriff then—takes control of things. They fin' this fella layin' there bleedin' from his head, out cold. They tote him into the hotel but he dies that night."

"Who shot him?"

"Nobody knows. They buried him in the cemetery. Nobody ever knowed his name." The hostler drank again. Buck put the bottle back in the saddle-bag. "Fat Mike bought this fella's horse an' saddle."

"Maybe I knew him," said Buck. "What'd he look like?"

"Tall fella. 'Bout your age. Fancy outerfit—cheyenne chaps, Mex dollars for spur rowels. Know him?"

Buck shook his head. "Nope. . ." The description fitted Tip Ames completely. A touch of dismay hit him. Who had killed Tip Ames? And why?

Tip Ames, according to the hostler, had got drunk and talked. That was about it, Buck realized; Tip had told of the money he was packing. And

(Continued On Page 102)

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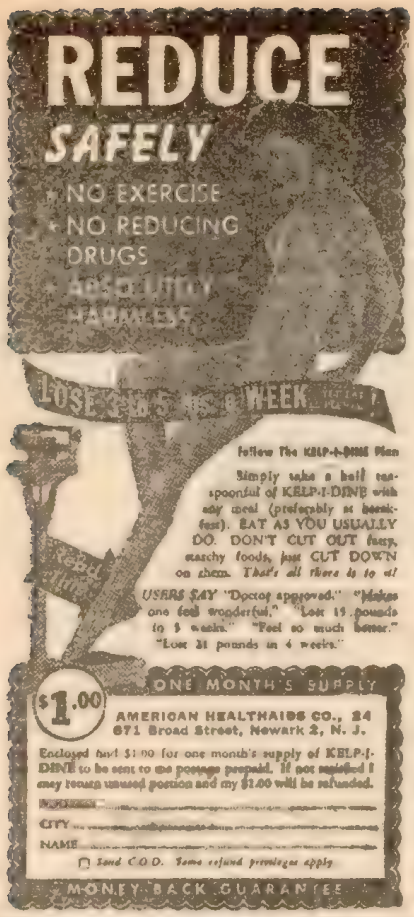
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(Continued From Page 101)

somebody had killed him for it.

Who?

Buck left then. Tortilla Joe and Jeffers and Fat Mike stood in front of the Milestone. Their eyes were impassive, expressionless, when Buck passed.

Buck went to the little grass-covered cemetery. Standing there in the heavy dusk, he looked at the fresh grave.

John Doe?

Born ?
Died July 9, 1890

Well, if Tip *was* buried there, his search was over. But was he buried here? Buck doubted that. One reason substantiated his conclusion. Tip was damn stubborn.

TIP might have talked about his money, but he never would have told where that money was. Wild horses couldn't have dragged that from him. And what would be the use of killing a man for his money—if you didn't know where the money was hidden?

Tip had sewed the nine thousand dollars between the sheepskin and the leather of his saddle skirts, about the last place a thief would look. Fat Mike had Tip's saddle. Buck decided to find the saddle.

And if the money was still with the saddle? Then Tip would be held captive someplace. They would try to make him talk. Nevertheless, Buck looked at the new grave, and wished he knew.

He could get a shovel and dig it open, then he would know for sure. But he decided to find the saddle first.

He went to the Bull Elk restaurant, took a stool, and ordered. The steak was as tough as a hame strap.

Jeffers entered and said, "I figgered you'd left town by now, fella."

Buck spoke quietly. "You goin' to run me out, Jeffers?"

"I could."

"Why not try it?"

Jeffers debated with this and then said, "There'll be time for that." He went to where Fat Mike and Tortilla

sat in a booth. They had a quart bottle on the table and Tortilla was telling a ribald Mexican joke. But there was no smile on Fat Mike's heavy face, nor on Jeffers'.

Fat Mike and Tortilla Joe got up to leave. The Mexican shoved into Buck, pushing him hard against the counter. He mumbled something in swift, low Spanish. To the others, who did not know Spanish, he seemed only a drunken *vaquero,* cursing his errant staggering feet.

Buck gave him a hard shove; Tortilla almost fell down. He pulled his black brows down sharply.

"You look for trouble, no?"

"Get outa my sight," growled Buck.

Fat Mike, cigar tipped at a belligerent angle, pulled Tortilla Joe back. "You'll make a hell of a mess in here." He smiled with his lips only. "You'll know down that pie counter an' raise hell in general."

Tortilla Joe blinked. "Okay," he mumbled grudgingly.

They left; Buck went back to his steak. From the corner of one eye he watched Jeffers. The gunman was regarding him with a heavy stare. Buck grinned and paid his bill. He went down-street and entered the Bald Eagle saloon. A few minutes later Jeffers sauntered in and took a position down the bar.

Shadowing me, thought Buck.

"This fella Fat Mike," asked Buck of the barkeeper. "He own a store in this burg?"

"Down the street. The Mercantile."

Now it was straight in Buck's mind. Tortilla had told him, back there in the cafe, that Tip's saddle was in Fat Mike's storehouse, back of Fat Mike's store.

Buck drank up, paid, left. When he crossed the street Jeffers was leaving the saloon. Jeffers stopped, talked to a man. Buck moved back into the mouth of the alley.

Deep in the darkness, he flattened against an outbuilding. For ten minutes he remained here, and then a man passed him and went down the alley.

Buck moved back between two buildings. A few minutes later, he

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

was hidden by the shadows of the Mercantile's storehouse.

He leaned his shoulder against the door; no give. A few feet away was a scrap pile of discarded machinery. He searched this, found a leaf from a buggy-spring.

He inserted the steel between the door and frame, and pushed. Steel bent; wood crackled. The door opened silently. Buck slipped inside.

The interior was pitch black. The odors of harnesses, lasso ropes, and greasy machinery were strong. His eyes became gradually accustomed to the darkness; various shadows began to take definite form.

Yonder was a four-horse seeder, a gang plow, and a ten-foot disc. Those black splotches against the far wall were harnesses hanging. Perched on a rail below them were some saddles.

He would know Tip's saddle. The swell-forked kak was deeply engraved, and it had a flat Mexican silver horn. Buck doubted if another saddle in this section had such a horn.

HE IDENTIFIED the first saddle by its flat-plate rigging. A Hamley. The second was an Al Furstnow saddle from Miles City. So was the third. The fourth was Tip's saddle. . .

He pulled the saddle down, hunkered beside it. Then fear touched him with icy fingers. His heart pounded dully. For the saddle skirts had been cut open!

Fat Mike had found Tip's money! And, by that token, Tip Ames was dead. Fat Mike had not buried a dummy out there in that graveyard, buried a dummy to make people think Tip was dead while Fat Mike had held him captive. Fat Mike had really buried Tip Ames!

Then through these discordant thoughts came the sense of impending danger. He flattened against the wall, gun in hand. He had left the door slightly ajar. Now it opened and a man slipped inside. Buck caught the man's outline but could not identify him.

Had Jeffers trailed him? Buck waited patiently, and his patience

was rewarded. Groping his way, the man passed before him, and Buck's .45 descended in a sharp arc.

The heavy barrel smashed through the man's Stetson. Steel slammed against skull. But he had a head of iron; Buck's gunbarrel slid off his head, whammed down on his thick shoulder.

Quickly Buck moved in. The man turned, grunting. His right hand went for his gun. Buck's .45 crashed in again. The gunbarrel beat squarely across the man's skull. He dropped his gun; his knees buckled.

Buck caught him, lowered him a-ground. Tensely, he stood over him, keening the night. But the only alien sound was that of a drunken cowpuncher bawling out a trail-song there on the main street. Evidently, then, this fellow had been alone.

Buck knelt, thumbed a match. There, in that brief yellow light, he studied the man's features. And a crooked smile slowly twisted his lips. He snapped the match in two, cursing under his breath. The man was Tortilla Joe!

This was no place to loiter. The Mexican angled over one shoulder, Buck went outside, closing the door behind him. Suddenly, he flattened against the wall, gun palmed. A man was moving toward him in the alley. Now he halted, peered toward Buck. Buck recognized Jeffers.

Jeffers said, "Who goes there?"

But Jeffers waited for no answer. His gun lifted, spoke hotly. Already Buck McKee was shifting positions, his own .45 talking. He heard Jeffers' bullet slap into the wall beside him. Now Buck's bullet found Jeffers. The leaden slug knocked Jeffers to the ground. Jeffers was screaming for Fat Mike.

Hard on the roar of the guns came the pound of boots, the babble of raised voices, Despite the weight of the limp Mexican, Buck hurried up the alley. Now a building loomed ahead in the darkness. There was a well beside it. Buck placed Tortilla Joe against the building, pumped his Stetson full of cold water, doused it into the Mex's heavy face. Tortilla's eyes opened.

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

"What happened, Buck?"

"You damn fool! You went into that storehouse while I was inside. I didn't recognize you. I laid my gun-barrel across your thick skull." Buck also told him about the gun-fight with Jeffers.

"You keel the o'nery son, Buck?"

Buck shook his head. "I don't reckon so. But I don't think he recognized me. He was more in the light than I was."

Tortilla Joe ran a greasy finger gingerly through his hair. "There ees a beeg lump, there. But the skin she ees not busted. But my head ees achin'." He got shakily a-foot.

"What were you doin' in the warehouse?" demanded Buck.

"I was goin' to look for Tip's saddle. The money she ees still een the saddle, no?"

"No," said Buck.

TORTILLA'S dark eyes showed alarm. "Then Senor Tip ees dead?" He shook his head slowly. "That I do not believe, Buck. I heard Fat Mike an' Jeffers talkin'. An' they said they were goin' to talk to the prisoner again soon. They did not know that I was overhearin' them."

"Overhearin'," corrected Buck. "You think the prisoner is Tip?"

Tortilla Joe shrugged. "That I do not know, but I can hope. What is next, Buck?"

"Is Fat Mike suspicious of you?"

"Fat Mike," said Tortilla philosophically, "ees suspicious of heem-self, Buck. But I'll go back to the fat peeg. What do you do next, amigo?"

Buck said grimly, "Hell, I'm diggin' open that grave. I'm goin' to make sure whether Tip is dead—or alive!"

Buck got a shovel from a nearby shed. Many questions troubled him. Had Jeffers recognized him? If Jeffers had, then he and Fat Mike would suspect him; they would hunt him down.

Buck worked hard. Moonlight glistened on his corded arm muscles. Sweat trickled down his chest and made his wet shirt cling to him. He

could not devote himself wholeheartedly to his work. For always there was the thought that Jeffers and Fat Mike might come to the graveyard, come to see if anybody had opened—or was opening—this grave.

His shovel flashed in the bright moonlight. He worked with one eye on the road leading to Dawson. One thing was in his favor—the dirt was loose, easy to move. Every minute he expected his shovel to hit a plank coffin. He hoped that—if Tip were buried here—they had put him in a coffin. He did not like the idea of running a shovel into a dead man.

Suddenly his shovel hit something hard. Dreadful anticipation ran through him. But the shovel was not hitting boards.

He understood what had happened. He had dug below the soft earth. Now the dry, hard ground was below, undisturbed by shovel. This gave him new hope. For he realized that Tip Ames was not buried here.

A shallow grave had been dug, then the hole had been filled again. The whole thing was a blind.

Buck straightened, wiped his forehead. Tip Ames, he knew, was alive.

But where was Tip?

He stood hidden by the brush and tried to piece the puzzle together. Now where would Fat Mike and Jeffers be holding Tip a captive? Had Tortilla any information regarding Tip's whereabouts?

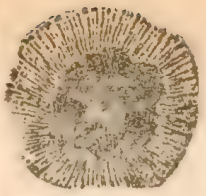
He heard boots approaching. Now two men came out of the shadows. One was an immense, heavy-set man—the other was tall, lanky. Fat Mike and Jeffers. They halted beside the open grave. Jeffers' left arm was in a sling.

Fat Mike said huskily, "That cowboy's been here, sure as hell. Damned if he didn't open up that fake grave we made!"

Fat Mike looked over the darkened brush, cigar tilted. "Wonder where he went, Jeffers? An' where is he now?"

"I sure don't know, Fat Mike. But I do know one thing—he knows Tip Ames is alive. An' he might locate the ol' mine."

(Continued On Page 108)



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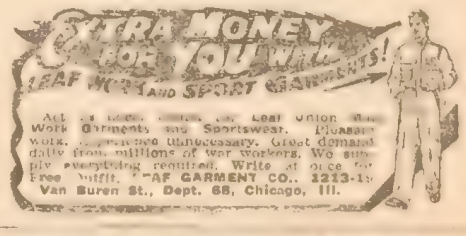
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(Continued From Page 107)

"We better do somethin'," growled Fat Mike.

They wheeled away into the darkness. Buck McKee chewed a cold cigaret and frowned. Jeffers had mentioned an *old mine*. . . Now where did a *mine* fit into the picture?

SUDDENLY he pivoted, his guns raised, for a man was coming through the brush. Buck flattened against a tree, his guns ready. Now the man, breathing heavily, came closer. Brush crackled under his hurrying boots. Frowning, Buck waited. Then he lowered his guns.

"Tortilla, here."

Tortilla's brown eyes were big. "They thought I was drunk," he said hurriedly. "I laid down on the floor. They thought I had—what you call it? Passed out, that's it—"

Buck shook him. "An' then?"

"I hear them talk, Senor Buck. Thees Teep Ames, he ees alive! They have him in the ol' mine!"

"Where's the mine?"

"Out of town—north. About a half-mile, I guess. We go, no?"

"Yes."

Buck's plan was simple. They would arrive at the mine before Jeffers and Fat Mike. They would wait until the pair arrived; after that there would be gunfire, Buck figured.

The country was rough. Bullberry bushes blocked their progress. Rosebush thorns snagged their clothing. Buck lead the way, breaking through the brush, following dim trails.

He guessed at the mine's location. He had an idea it was a coal mine. There was no gold or silver in this section. But there were veins of thick lignite coal.

They halted once on a ridge. Fat Mike and Jeffers were just leaving Dawson. They were a-horseback.

Buck found a well-traveled trail marked by boots and horse spore. They did not follow it. They moved unseen through the brush bordering it. Buck expected a guard ahead, but no strident voice halted them and they stood in the mine's doorway.

"No guard, huh," grunted Buck. "Prob'ly be one inside.

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

They moved forward silently. The shaft was so high they could stand upright. The reflection of a lantern danced on the wall ahead.

"The guard's aroun' the bend, Tortilla. You stay behin' me. I'll jump on him if I can. If he sees us an' starts firing, give him lead!"

"Si, Buck."

Silently, cautiously, they went forward. They had to work fast and knock the guard out before Jeffers and Fat Mike arrived.

Beyond the guard were some steel rods running perpendicular. These made a cell at the end of the shaft. Buck saw a doorway in the rods, but he could not see back into the cell.

Buck slid forward along the wall. The guard's back was toward him; he lunged. The guard grunted and crashed forward on his face. He dropped his gun. Buck got astraddle him. His .45 chopped down twice; the guard went limp.

Buck was still astraddle the guard. He froze in that position. He glanced over his shoulder. Fat Mike and Jeffers stood behind him.

Fat Mike held two Colts. The lantern light danced from their cold barrels. Fat Mike's cigar was clamped between set lips, and his eyes were marbles glistening behind rolls of fat.

Jeffers stood beside Fat Mike. A faint smile rimmed his mouth. He held a .45 in his good hand.

Buck glanced at Tortilla. The Mexican's swarthy face was now the color of dry ashes. His hands rested on his holstered guns. Fat Mike's eyes bored into the Mexican.

"What you doin' here?"

"Buck, he ees my *amigo*," said Tortilla.

Fat Mike nodded slowly. "So you two was playin' a double-cross game, huh? Well, this is the rub-out for you gents!"

There was only one thing to do; and Buck did it. He turned on his hips, his guns rising. He moved fast, but not fast enough.

Already Fat Mike's guns roared. One bullet ricocheted. The other tore along Buck's thigh and smashed

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

into the guard. The bullet killed the guard.

Now Buck's hammers dropped. Each gun roared three times. Tortilla's .45s were also talking. Jeffers was crouched, his pistol running red. Then all six of Buck's bullets hit Fat Mike.

FAT MIKE grunted, bent forward and dropped his Colts. One massive leg caved in, and he toppled sidewise.

Buck turned his guns on Jeffers, but Jeffers was already down, looking like a lanky buzzard, there on the mine's floor. Tortilla grinned, holstered his smoking guns, and waddled over to Buck.

"You hurt, no?" The Mex's voice held anxiety.

Buck grunted, "My leg, fella."

Tip Ames was hollering from the cell. They paid him no attention as Tortilla tore Jeffers' shirt into strips and bound it. Buck got to his feet.

He grinned. "Better let Tip out, Tortilla."

"They didn't treat you so good, huh, Tip?" he asked.

Tip said gravely, "It was no picnic, Buck. They had their ways to try to make me talk. But I kept my mouth shut 'cause I knew you two hellions would come soon."

Buck asked, "Where's the money?"

"I hid it out in the brush right before I got too drunk that night. I had a hunch somebody might try to highjack me. It was Fat Mike hisself who slugged me. Then he shoots up in the air before anybody gets there to make it look like we had a gunfight. They didn't dare kill me because they never would find the *dinero* if they knocked me off. Are they all dead?"

"All dead," said Tortilla.

"Nobody'll ever know who killed them," said Buck. "Not that it makes any difference if anybody does know we notched them off. Now we better get that money an' buy them bulls. Your ol' man'll be waitin' for them, Tip."

"So will the cows," said Tip, smiling.

THE END

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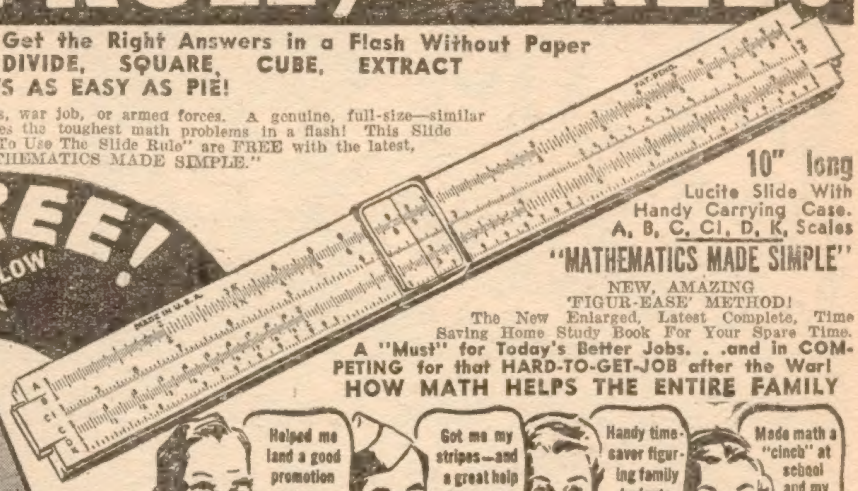

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